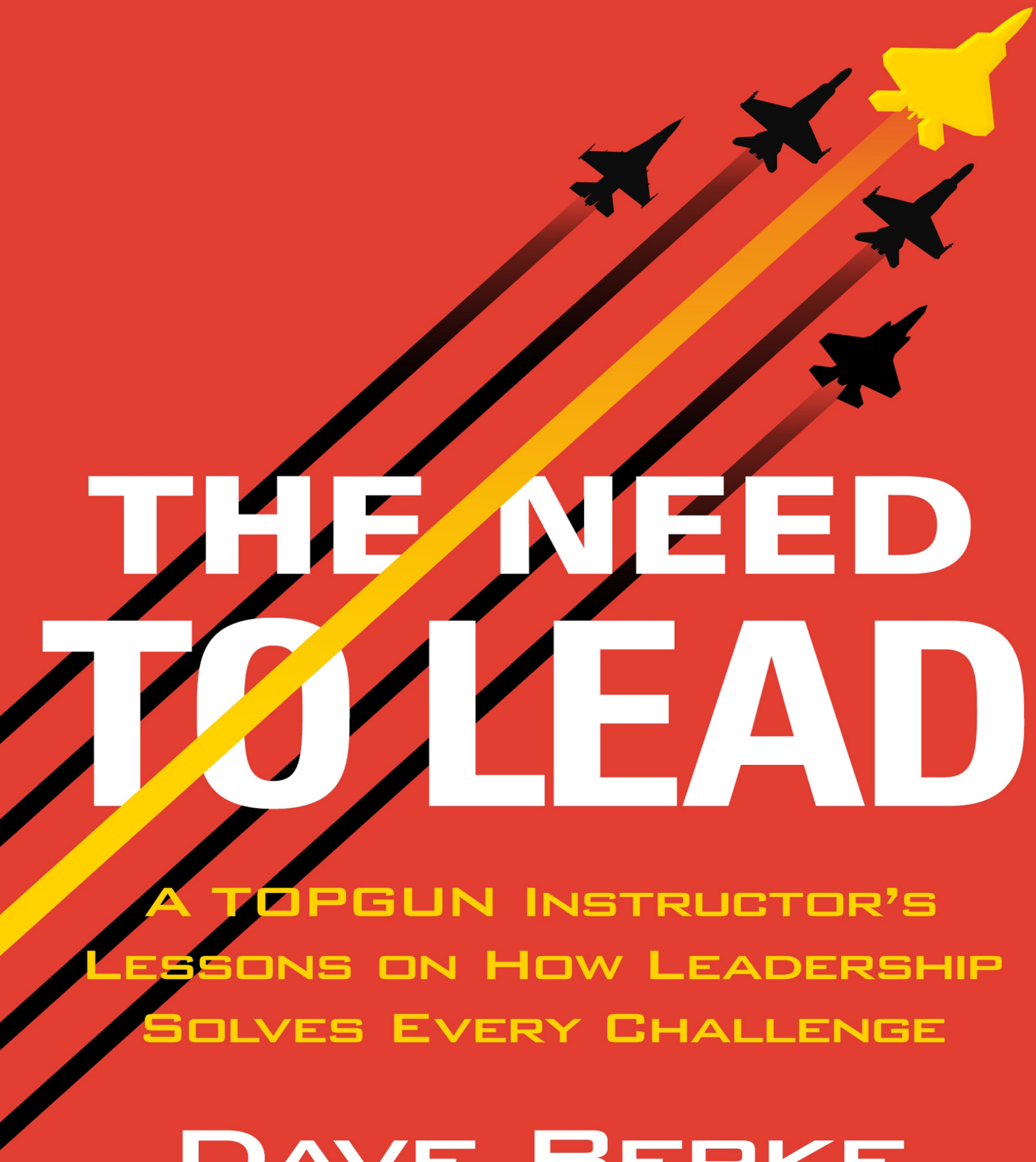

THE NEED TO LEAD

A TOPGUN Instructor's Lessons on How Leadership Solves Every Challenge

Dave Berke

Foreword by Jocko Willink

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To Chris, who sacrificed everything and taught me what it means to be brave.

And to Kat, who endured the unimaginable and taught me what it means to be strong.

I hope you are both proud.

FOREWORD

IN THE BATTLE OF RAMADI, 2006—every single operation conducted by coalition forces was critical. It was an all-hands-on-deck. Violent insurgents controlled two-thirds of the city, regularly launching complex coordinated attacks on friendly forces. Every day American servicemen and women were wounded or killed. To overcome the enemy—or even to survive—we all needed to work together: soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines brought their specialized equipment, skills, and war-fighting ability to the fight.

During that battle, I was the Commander of SEAL Team Three's Task Unit Bruiser. For a small unit, we had a relatively powerful and unique capability. Highly trained snipers, forceful breachers, aggressive machine gunners, crafty point men, and elite combat medics. But in order to maximize our effectiveness in this battle, we had to integrate with conventional units of the Army and the Marine Corps.

These were the circumstances in which I met Dave Berke. He was a distinguished graduate of the rigorous Marine Corps Basic School. He finished at the top of his class in flight school and became a naval aviator. Based on his stellar performance during flight training, he was selected to become a fighter pilot. As a Marine Corps single-seat F/A-18 fighter pilot, he was selected to attend the TOPGUN school. After the terrorist attacks of September 11th, he flew countless combat missions as a pilot and landed hundreds of times on that tiny patch of steel in the ocean called an aircraft carrier. The Marine Corps then chose Major Berke to return to TOPGUN as

an instructor, where he was eventually selected to be the lead instructor at the TOPGUN school.

But I didn't know any of this about Dave when I met him in 2006—and I wouldn't find out about any of it for years. He didn't mention a hint of this impressive pedigree when we met. Instead, he simply said, "I'm Dave from ANGLICO (Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company). We're here to help you guys out however we can."

And we certainly needed his help. As SEALs, we also had highly trained Joint Tactical Air Controllers (JTACs), who communicate with aircraft overhead to pass information and provide support. But our SEAL JTACs have other jobs: They are assaulters, grenadiers, and radiomen who communicate with multiple ground units, deconflicting battlespace and coordinating efforts. Our JTACs have a lot on their plate—especially in a brutal and chaotic battle like Ramadi. Conversely, the Marine Corps' ANGLICO teams' sole function is to interface with overhead aircraft, gather intelligence and situational awareness from the various airborne platforms, and call in fire support for the troops on the ground when needed. By adding ANGLICO team members to our SEAL Task Unit, our operations would be exponentially more effective.

And that is exactly what happened. Dave and his team joined us on scores of operations. I stood side by side with him on the battlefield on missions as we pushed from house to house, street to street, neighborhood to neighborhood, clearing insurgents from the city, together as a team, with the rest of the coalition forces. Dave led expertly—ensuring his team provided critical support to coalition ground forces during hundreds of complex and violent combat operations.

While interservice rivalries have caused friction throughout our military history—there was none of that in Ramadi. There was no flexing of rank or status or position. No political maneuvering, petty infighting, or power struggles. Dave epitomized that attitude: There was only the mission and the team—and sacrifice.

Incredible sacrifices were made in that battle. Incredible heroes were lost from the ranks of the brave men and women who fought for our great nation. Our SEAL Task Unit lost Marc Lee, the first SEAL killed in Iraq;

Michael Monsoor, the second SEAL killed in Iraq, who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions when he jumped on an enemy grenade to save three of our fellow SEALs; and eventually Ryan Job, who was shot, gravely wounded, and eventually died from medical complications during a procedure to repair the damage that had been done. Dave and his ANGLICO team lost Chris Leon, a brave Marine, just twenty years old, who gave the last full measure—for us.

And through these trials of blood and fire—we learned. We learned about life and death. We learned about triumph and loss. And we learned about leadership: the most important thing on the battlefield—and how victory was achieved in the city of Ramadi. It is the determining factor in success, whether it be the individual's actions and attitude or the collective impact of teams that work together and sacrifice to accomplish the mission. I saw leadership from Dave that I would never forget. Assessing risk, making decisions, building relationships, and humbly putting the team first. It was a bond that would never be broken.

Years passed. I carried on with my career, eventually retired from the Navy, and began teaching leadership along with my SEAL teammate Leif Babin at a company we founded called Echelon Front. Eventually, through that company, we were reunited with Dave Berke. He came to an event that we were speaking at and watched us teach the leadership principles we had learned and tested on the battlefield.

It was good to see Dave again. I didn't know that after Ramadi, Dave had carried on with his career—a career that was stellar by any measurement. In addition to flying the F-18 and the F-16, he had become qualified to fly both the F-22 Raptor and the F-35 Lightning—the only pilot qualified to fly all of America's most advanced jets. And he didn't just fly them; he had been selected as the commander of the Raptor Operational Test Division and was eventually selected as the first operational F-35B squadron commander. But I didn't know any of this at the time. Instead, after the event, Dave just said to me, "It's been good to see you. I would like to help you guys out however I can."

So began the next phase of working together. This time, there were no enemy insurgents, no roadside bombs being detonated, and no mortars

falling from the sky. Our mission was no longer fighting to protect an innocent local populace while driving a determined enemy from a war-torn city. But we had a new mission—one that has had an equivalent impact. At Echelon Front our new mission is to pass on the leadership lessons we learned on the battlefield to leaders around the world from every imaginable industry.

Dave jumped straight into action. He had honed his teaching skills as an instructor at TOPGUN. He understood the principles of leadership we taught because he had lived them with us—and utilized them throughout his career, not only while flying fighter jets, but more important, while leading Marines and instructing fellow fighter pilots at TOPGUN. As Dave taught thousands of leaders from hundreds of companies these principles of leadership, he reflected on how they had been revealed throughout his own life, before, during, and after the Marine Corps. Eventually he began sharing those stories with me, and I finally told him, "These stories—and these lessons—are a book. You need to start writing."

Thankfully, he did start writing. The result is this book, *The Need to Lead*, where Dave shares how he learned the skills of leadership in combat, both on the ground and in the air. He utilized these leadership skills in dogfights and in aircraft carrier landings. He has applied them successfully in the professional world, up and down the chain of command, to teach both TOPGUN students and to guide civilian teams. And he has used these principles in his family to be a better father and husband. This book continues the lessons from *Extreme Ownership* and *The Dichotomy of Leadership*, giving new tools and different perspectives to help people lead.

Readers will see that every problem is a leadership problem—and therefore, leadership is the solution. People will be warned about the dangers of ego and complacency. Readers will realize that ownership must be proactive and absolute. They will recognize the importance of listening and of adapting to change. Anyone who reads this book will fully understand that the team is more important than any one individual on that team. They will also fully grasp that while there is no such thing as perfection, it is the continued pursuit of improvement—through openly

admitting and correcting shortfalls—that puts us on the path to becoming our best, both as individuals and as teams.

Finally—anyone who reads this book will recognize its most important lesson: In any endeavor, at any level, in any organization, you must step up and lead. Perhaps you are simply leading yourself as an individual contributor, student, or frontline worker. You might be a husband or wife helping to lead a family. Maybe you are directing a small team of first responders helping people stay safe. Or you could be a CEO overseeing tens of thousands of employees and billions of dollars of revenue. It doesn't matter what station of life you are in: salesperson in a retail shop, mechanic in a repair shop, foreman on a job site, supervisor of a regional branch, chief operating officer, governor, admiral, general, or president. No matter who you are or what you do, this book makes it absolutely clear: *you Need to Lead*—and this book shows you how.

Jocko Willink
January 2025

INTRODUCTION

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Naval Air Station Fallon, Nevada
TOPGUN Class 01–05
July 2001
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"SHOWTIME 11, *BREAK RIGHT*!"

My wingman's panicked radio call elevated my heart rate to DEFCON 1, the maximum state of readiness. That "break right" call meant he'd seen an enemy fighter headed straight at me, and unless I wanted to get shot, I had to maneuver. Blindly, I rolled my jet to the right and aggressively yanked the stick into my lap like a reflex, setting up a maximum G-Force turn. A threat was out there, and I needed to find it. Immediately.

Exactly as it's taught at TOPGUN, my wingman barked a second call moments later: "Bandit, five o'clock low!" He could see what I couldn't. An enemy aircraft had snuck behind our formation and selected me as its target, wreaking havoc on my flight mission. With no time to alert my team or pass on any guidance, I was forced to spiral away as the leader of my formation and look for an invisible enemy.

My color vision faded, the G-Forces effectively draining the blood from my head and trying by all measure to put me to sleep. Sweat dripped off the seam of my helmet, down my forehead, the salt stinging my already overburdened eyes, as I scanned for the elusive bandit. "*How did I let this happen?*" I thought. Even under the weight of the crushing turn, the question lingered in my mind. I knew it was my fault. This was a completely preventable scenario—but I had become fixated on what was ahead and ignored what might be behind me.

"*Tally one!*" I grunted through the strain of the Gs. Within seconds I'd spotted the lone F-5E Tiger, a tiny aircraft covered in chameleon brown camouflage paint, which from my vantage was the size of a thumbtack and had all but vanished against the desert floor below. This was the exact same plane used in the 1986 movie *Top Gun* that gave Maverick and Goose, similar problems. Only this wasn't a Hollywood set—this plane was maneuvering for the kill … against *me.*

"Showtime 11 is *engaged*," I alerted my wingman. Resigned, I knew I had no choice but to maintain a turning fight with the F-5, abandoning the plan to stay out in front of my larger formation. Fortunately, compared with the dominant F/A-18 Hornet I controlled, the Tiger was a mediocre machine and one I expected to dispose of quickly. "I'll end this in one turn and get back to business," I thought as I maneuvered for a shot.

But my overconfidence was soon demolished by a magnificent counter-maneuver by the supposedly inferior enemy, dashing any hopes of a quick kill. Despite my expectations, my adversary was exceedingly worthy, and it was clear a prolonged fight was unfolding.

For a moment, I considered ignoring the voice in my head telling me this wasn't going well. "Showtime 11 is offensive" would have been the ideal call announcing to the formation that I was about to dispose of the meager Tiger and return to my rightful place at the tip of the spear. I was anything but. In fact, the pilot at the controls of the F-5 moved it in a way I had never seen and made it impossible to kill.

So, I accepted reality, detached from my initial frustration, and took on a new role. My job now was to tie up the bandit in a close-in dogfight, allowing my wingman the opportunity to shoot at him, so we could try to get back to the formation. Around and around the Tiger and I went, plummeting toward the earth.

"Showtime 12, *Fox-2*!" my wingman called out mercifully, announcing that he'd launched a simulated missile against the Tiger.

"Terminate, terminate!" The Tiger, which I eventually learned was flown by a TOPGUN graduate, called his theoretical demise. My wingman, had we been in an actual dogfight, landed what would have been a direct hit.

“Showtime 11, terminate.” I acknowledged the successful, albeit hypothetical kill and was relieved that my wingman had at last ended this unplanned engagement. Now we could return to the larger mission.

However, while our entire sideshow took a scant forty-five seconds, my formation had left me behind. I, the mission commander and flight lead for TOPGUN Class 01–05’s graduation exercise, was now miles behind and thousands of feet below the rest of my team.

They were on their own. It would take minutes to reconnect with my formation, but that was an eternity in the world of aerial combat, where closure rates between friendlies and foes easily exceed a thousand miles per hour. I knew that less than fifty miles in front of them were at least a dozen enemy aircraft aligned in a complex formation, waiting to unleash their worst. And suddenly, I had gone from the apex to “Tail-end Charlie,” an unflattering term for a lagging teammate. This mission was no longer about me. It was about the team that I feared I had just let down.

Over the previous days, I had planned, briefed, rehearsed, and visualized exactly how I wanted the mission to go. We called ourselves Showtime, a nod to Vietnam-era TOPGUN graduates who used the same call sign in their F-4 Phantoms while killing MiGs. Those guys were the stuff of legend, and put TOPGUN on the map as the place every fighter pilot ever to strap into a jet wanted to be. Heroically, I would lead from the front, guiding my team through a barrage of enemy fighters, navigating the seven other F/A-18 Hornets to a target that I would be the first to attack. I envisioned how my skillful flight leadership would safely bring them all home, where I would be showered with praise by the TOPGUN instructors. My fellow students would be grateful for my ability to shepherd them through the toughest flight of the course.

Only none of that happened.

Tail-end Charlie and his bruised ego would spend the rest of the exercise watching his classmates lead the assault through the enemy formation, to the target, and back home. I didn’t fire a single weapon on the way in and would be the last to drop my bombs. The perfect mission I envisioned in my plan couldn’t have gone more awry, and I was shocked by how much had changed over the course of just a few minutes.

Yet, the mission was deemed a complete success. The debrief revealed that my team had dominated. Despite my marginal involvement, our formation killed every enemy and destroyed each ground target to which they were assigned. My contribution as the “leader” was nothing like my cinematic daydreams. I couldn’t help but lament how little I did during the mission itself, and it bothered me immensely. Instead of being the conductor, positioned in the very front as I had envisioned, I felt like a passenger in the caboose of a train being pulled along by my teammates. So the praise and congratulations that flowed my way puzzled me.

That final mission proved to be the perfect case study for many of the key lessons taught at TOPGUN. Nothing ever happened the way I anticipated. Missions never went as briefed. Chaos reigned everywhere. And though I expected my skills in the cockpit to be the main determinant, flight leadership was absolutely the most important factor in my success. That final lesson was a revelation to me, since I had always presumed that my individual ability was the ultimate objective.

My childhood dream and sole vision was to become a great fighter pilot. The goal was intensely specific for someone my age. I wasn’t just looking to fly a jet, I wanted to fly the exact plane on the poster in my room: the Marine Corps F/A-18 Hornet, the single-seat variant, in an aircraft carrier–based squadron, stationed in Southern California. There was only one such plane at the time.

But when, as an awkward fifteen-year-old, I declared this dream to my mom, as outlandish and statistically unlikely as it was, she simply said, “Someone has to do it. It might as well be you.” To another kid that might have been a throwaway comment or taken as some rote platitude a parent would say to make their son or daughter feel supported. I took my mother at face value, and from that moment on, I was hyperfocused on my mission. Everything I did fell into one of two categories—a means to achieving that mission, or a distraction to eliminate.

In hindsight, achieving that goal had nothing to do with a desire to lead; rather, the pursuit was a self-centered one. Being a world-class fighter pilot was the only thing that mattered to me.

To get what I wanted, I put my head down and simply followed the required steps. After high school I enrolled in the local college. I got a job at Target and earned enough to pay for tuition. The Marines' Officer Candidate program accepted me, and I received my commission. After I completed the Marine Corps' Officer Basic School, I was selected to attend flight school.

For the next two years, I was trained, evaluated, and ranked against my student-pilot peers. We competed head-to-head to be selected for the same incredibly precise goal—the chance to fly Hornets off a carrier. The pursuit of knowledge and information became an obsession, knowing that I needed to master the movements of a plane and the systems that made it exceptional in order to succeed. And due to that hard work and one-pointed determination, and some good fortune, my goal became a concrete reality. I was assigned to a single-seat carrier-based F-18 squadron stationed in Southern California—the exact one I told my mom about a decade earlier. Mission accomplished.

Or so I assumed.

The true mission was only just beginning, because from the moment I arrived at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar and checked in to Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 314, I realized that the task was not only about honing my flight acumen or ability to maneuver the jet. In a profession where being technically outstanding was the norm, what made a truly great pilot was how well they could lead.

Exceptional flight leadership is necessary to guide massively complex formations of aircraft to and from combat zones. Bad weather, enemy weapons, and a host of other distracters make flight leadership a challenge. But the attributes required to successfully lead a flight are the same ones that allow someone to lead anywhere. And my experiences inside the cockpit of a fighter reinforced that time and again. While at 314, I deployed to Iraq and flew my first real missions from a carrier, I attended TOPGUN as a student, and I went to war. Each experience reinforced and magnified what was perhaps the ultimate realization in my career as a fighter pilot, that *flying is leadership.*

After completing a carrier deployment to Afghanistan, just as the Global War on Terrorism began after 9/11, I was invited back to instruct at TOPGUN and was charged with teaching flight leadership at the pinnacle of my community. I was living the script of the *Top Gun* movie, but I was never the main character. I was merely there to pass on the lessons I'd learned—the ones that remained true at every stage of my twenty-three-year career in the Corps, including every combat deployment.

These lessons held fast in my four years working for the US Air Force as the only Marine to ever fly their unassailable F-22 Raptor. They were crucial when I commanded the world's first operational F-35B squadron, which ushered in a generational shift in what was expected of a pilot and plane. No matter where I was, what I did, how much I learned, or how capable I became as my career progressed, my success became less and less about how I flew my plane, and more and more about how I led while flying it.

A fighter pilot exists because of the team, and for the team. My skills were honed in order to make my squadron perform better. It was never about me as an individual, but rather about highlighting the strengths of the team. In fact, the primary job of a Marine Corps fighter pilot is to support troops on the ground. In combat, my mission was to provide firepower to those earthbound, risking their lives on the front lines of war. From three miles up, I possessed a uniquely detached vantage point. From that perspective, I could see the best ways to support the team, help them win individual battles, and contribute to victory in the overall mission.

The ability to remain detached proved massively influential in my own development. As my career progressed, I was able to reflect on my initial misguided ideas about leadership. My natural ego-driven inclinations, my self-serving tendencies, would have led to failure in and out of the cockpit.

Leadership is counterintuitive. I imagined myself following the traditional depiction of military leaders who took charge and dictated orders to achieve victory. But the real world is nothing like a war movie. I couldn't make everything happen by myself—no leader can. Empowering, trusting, and listening to subordinates always produced better ideas and the best results.

My belief that being at the top of my class conferred upon me instant credibility proved wrong. Humility was a far more respected and valuable characteristic when I'd try to influence my team. From a distance, perfection seemed to be the standard, but my mistakes were actually what propelled my progress. In a jet, risks become higher, tolerances get tighter, speed increases, and errors are amplified. Only after countless missteps did I come to understand what good leadership was. Individual talent may have aided the outcome, but it always required the contributions of the entire team.

While it's hard to identify which of my experiences shaped me most significantly, my time as a TOPGUN instructor was unique. At TOPGUN, my only job was to pass on the skill of leadership to some of the most gifted fighter pilots in the world. It was there that I realized that leadership was not a talent to be revered, but rather a skill to be taught. TOPGUN was also where I became certain that failure was the ultimate teacher of that skill.

At TOPGUN—a place synonymous with excellence, home to arguably the best pilots in the world—more mistakes were exposed than anywhere else I served. And that was the intent, the sole mission of the TOPGUN exercise—to find and mitigate error. Nowhere did I ever see more willingness to uncover, reveal, and share faults of every magnitude, all for the benefit of something much larger—the whole of Naval Aviation. I haven't seen anything quite like TOPGUN anywhere else in my career.

While the title of this book—*The Need to Lead*—invokes the classic *Top Gun* movie quote, it is the undeniable truth I experienced as a Marine Corps officer, fighter pilot, ground combat leader, husband, and father. This book's purpose is not only to help the reader be a better leader but also to understand that leadership is a universal requirement for success, no matter the environment. It is intended for anyone who seeks, every day, to improve themselves as a human being and to improve their team.

Every person *needs to lead* in order to succeed.

So, how do we develop these necessary skills?

We try. We fail. We assess. We learn. We grow. We improve. And we try again.

In my more than thirty-year career as a fighter pilot, Marine, instructor, and consultant, I've learned to live with my own mistakes. Because after each humbling moment, the same clear principle was delivered—*the need to lead.* By adopting the right leadership mindsets and behaviors, we gain the capacity to solve problems, support the people around us, and amend our mistakes. This is how we help our teams, families, communities, and ourselves through any circumstance and toward success.

At the midpoint of my career, I led a team of Marines on the ground in the Battle of Ramadi and served with two Navy SEALs, Jocko Willink and Leif Babin. Fighting alongside them and their entire SEAL Task Unit in almost every major operation in what at the time was the most dangerous city in the world, I observed yet again how good leadership was the most determinant factor in victory—from a perspective unlike anything I experienced inside a cockpit. This time, the bullets weren't twenty thousand feet below me echoing through a radio—they were snapping past my head, where I could feel their heat. The intensity of ground combat far exceeded even the toughest combat missions I flew in the Hornet, but both experiences highlighted the need for exceptional leadership.

In 2015, when Jocko and Leif's book *Extreme Ownership* was published, I immediately picked up a copy, less to relive these experiences than to support my friends. But as I read through the lessons we learned together and paid for in blood with the ultimate sacrifices of our brothers, I was struck by how our experiences were translated into a skill set that could be applied by every leader, in every capacity, facing any scope of problem, personally or professionally.

It wasn't until I became a leadership instructor that I realized the need for *all people* to learn these skills. I joined Echelon Front, Jocko and Leif's two-man leadership consulting operation, in the fall of 2016 just as *Extreme Ownership* rose in popularity and there was a need to expand. As we traveled to companies and taught leadership solutions to teams all over the world, we watched them transform. The impact of leadership training was immediate and profound—and it wasn't limited to combat. Factories increased efficiency with more engaged frontline workers. Construction companies avoided workplace injuries and mitigated risks. Marketing firms

better communicated their messages, with more collaboration and less overhead. Spouses strengthened marriages and raised more resilient and capable children. Each team's problems may have been different on the surface, but the solution they needed was always the same—*leadership.*

With this in mind, we codified the following four core beliefs that underline our organizational and leadership philosophy at Echelon Front:

1. First and foremost, *everyone is a leader.* From the CEO to the most junior frontline employee, everyone—in every industry, at every company, at every level, in every role—is a leader. Leadership isn't about rank, title, position, or function. You don't need to oversee people or have a place on your company's organizational chart. If you interact with another human being or do anything that has an impact on the team or outcome, you are a leader. The more we embrace that true definition, the more we realize how influential we can be—even if only serving as an example of how to act. The more people recognize this necessity, the more people will actively work toward solving the internal and external challenges facing the team. And the more people see themselves as leaders, the more people want to contribute to the team's success.
2. *Leadership exists in every capacity.* Leadership is often viewed as an attribute relevant to our professional lives, and most leadership books and training focus on the role of organizational leadership at work. But that represents only one aspect of leadership. Because it exists in every capacity, it applies in every situation. The same behaviors should guide us as parents, spouses, family members, and friends. It allows us to make the biggest impact on the people we love the most. The same applies in our communities—whether you're a part of a neighborhood watch, church, youth group, Little League, or PTA, or any of the countless other ways we interact with the people around us. And of course, leadership is required within each of us. Without question, leading ourselves is the hardest thing we do. Our greatest foe, our egos, can wreak havoc on the basic decisions we make for ourselves, leading us down a path of destruction. We make

questionable choices, eat the wrong foods, say things we don't mean, shut out helpful feedback, behave poorly, and fail to lead ourselves in so many ways. Yet the leadership behaviors that help us guide our families, teams, and communities are the same ones we need to guide ourselves. Leadership exists and applies everywhere.

3. Given that fact, we can acknowledge that *every problem we face is a leadership problem.* The problems we confront at work aren't caused by outdated policies, bad processes, ineffective bosses, or external factors. They are caused by our failure to lead. Our child's behavior isn't just a function of their age and tendencies; it's about us as parents. The same rings true for our communities, where we know they will thrive or fail based on the effectiveness of the leaders that make up those communities. Leadership constitutes the solution to every problem. And that understanding puts us in a position to exert influence on the outcome so much more than we typically give ourselves credit for. This recognition can transform our lives. If a lack of leadership is the problem, and good leadership is the solution, then how we lead becomes the most critical factor affecting the outcome.
4. Finally, and perhaps most important to recognize, is that *leadership is a skill.* Good leaders aren't simply born. No one naturally knows how to deal with every situation. But like hitting a baseball, learning arithmetic, playing piano, or training in jiujitsu, leadership can be learned, which means every single person in the world can get better at it if they choose. The process of learning, applying, and improving pertains to leadership, too. It's true that some people have a natural inclination toward good leadership. Some people are more articulate and dynamic speakers. Some people are naturally charismatic and thrive in front of a group. But because no one is born with all the skills of a leader, everyone can benefit from leadership development.

This book's content derives from my career in and out of the military, but the lessons are rooted in the beliefs I hold as a leadership instructor at Echelon Front. I've seen these beliefs validated time and again as we have grown into the premier leadership consultancy. This book examines the

tenets of leadership by drawing on examples from my personal experience. It is neither a biography nor a collection of war stories. Each chapter retells a tale of my failures—ones that left such an indelible mark on me that I was able to pinpoint the moment when I solidified my understanding of a key leadership concept.

The stories and experiences written about in this book are based on my imperfect memory. I have done everything I can to ensure the details are correct and represent the events as they occurred. At the same time, for their safety I have made deliberate adjustments to shield the identities of anyone on active duty. I have also used pseudonyms and made alterations to details in order to avoid revealing the names of employees, companies, and organizations Echelon Front works with. That said, these experiences are absolutely a reflection of real and personal interactions that proved so impactful, the need to share them with a larger audience was clear.

Nothing is unique about military leadership. We occasionally encounter people who are resistant to Echelon Front's principles because they are rooted in combat. But leadership is leadership. The exact same attributes and behaviors that result in success in the air and on the battlefield do the same in business and life. The same applies to what causes disaster in the cockpit or on the ground. And while some environments, like combat, are certainly magnified and intensified, good leadership stays the same and applies everywhere.

This book is also an extension of *Extreme Ownership*, containing attitudes and actions to add to a leader's ever-expanding tool kit for solving problems. I structured each chapter with the same format—describing a personal story, delineating a lesson, and providing a practical application. This methodology has proven ideal for taking seminal events and the associated lessons learned, then connecting them to the business and personal challenges of the real world so that they become relevant and relatable for everyone.

There are two parts to this book. Part I describes the mindset of a good leader—how one needs to think. Part II explains the behavior—how one needs to act. Unfortunately, we aren't always inclined to do the right thing as leaders. The optimal thoughts and actions of a good leader are often

antithetical to our natural human tendencies. The struggle to change these tendencies makes reading both sections imperative.

My pursuit to become a fighter pilot began as a self-serving interest, but the quest to become a leader has proven to be entirely the opposite. While becoming a leader is all on you, it's not *about* you at all. Your success benefits your team, in helping to solve their problems and supporting the people you care about. To be a good leader is the noblest of pursuits, albeit one with far less recognition than the glamorized illusion of *Top Gun*. But it's infinitely more rewarding.

In a world filled with uncertainties and risks, we must accept the responsibility of learning to lead, because it allows us to navigate through those uncertainties and risks. On the battlefield, in the air, and with my family, I have faced challenges and changes that seemed inescapable and insurmountable. But leadership allowed me to be more in control of these problems—often it was the only thing that did. By focusing the effort on our teams rather than on ourselves, we can make the right decisions under pressure. And if we are humble enough to prioritize our people and take ownership of our mistakes, we turn painful moments into powerful lessons.

Only good leadership assures that we can all make a difference in our lives, communities, and businesses, and that we can make this nation and world better. If you want to accomplish anything in this life, it depends on your ability to lead—more than anything else.

I often think back to my mom's response to my childhood dream, but now I know it needs to go a step further.

Someone has to lead, and *it needs to be you.*

Part I

THE MINDSETS OF A GOOD LEADER

1

EVERY PROBLEM IS A LEADERSHIP PROBLEM

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Ramadi, Iraq
Foot Patrol
May 2006
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WHOOOSH.

Ba-boom.

Here we go again.

As soon as I heard the unmistakable sound of the incoming mortar attack, I bent down to one knee as I had done dozens of times before. Mortars could be deadly. Lobbed thousands of feet in the air in a high arc, these miniature bombs could do incredible damage when they impacted the ground and exploded. Mortar attacks on US patrols were common, and they usually weren't very accurate. Based on how quiet this one was, I calculated it was thousands of feet away, and I wasn't too concerned. That's just the way it was around here. If you went on a patrol, you were going to get mortared.

One or two volleys hastily launched from the back of a pickup truck were the typical occurrence at the height of the counterinsurgency battle in Ramadi, Iraq, a city of about four hundred thousand at that time, nestled on the banks of the Euphrates River. Travel roughly due east 120 kilometers and you'd land in the capital, Baghdad. I'd been in Iraq for about four months and was used to the mortars. I expected nothing less this time around.

On this particular day, we were out of the densely populated city center in the quieter perimeter about ten clicks, or kilometers, north-northeast from our base, Camp Ramadi. Only a few scattered buildings peppered the surrounding area as we patrolled just south of a major highway. The threat seemed distant, so I mostly ignored it and did nothing.

That I was a Marine Corps fighter pilot with my boots on the ground in the most brutal epicenter of Operation Iraqi Freedom was a situation of my own making. After leaving my choice assignment at TOPGUN, where I had been the senior instructor, I volunteered as a Forward Air Controller (FAC). My initial orders were set for Japan, along with its beautiful scenery and world-class scuba diving. However, when help was needed in Iraq, I raised my hand for that tougher assignment, landing me in Ramadi in a unit called ANGLICO, the Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company. This posting was the exact opposite of TOPGUN in nearly every way.

Being at TOPGUN was surreal, my thirteen-year-old self's fantasy job come to life. Aside from it being a household name, it represents the pinnacle of fighter aviation. Every instructor is handpicked to be there. With only three Marine pilots on the staff of the predominantly Navy school, I was in an exclusive club that came with many perks. Flying several hops a day, I taught the most advanced fighter tactics in the world and was qualified in multiple fighter jets. I had almost unlimited freedom, influence, and autonomy at TOPGUN. I was in charge of day-to-day operations at the most famous flying school in the world and I drove a Corvette. Life was awesome.

ANGLICO was a first-class ground unit made up of stellar Marines, all responsible for providing air and fire support to whoever needed it. And in 2006, in that part of the world, it was needed a lot. Given my previous combat experience in the F/A-18 Hornet, the unit was a great fit for me, allowing me to use my knowledge of aircraft to assist the Army soldiers, Navy SEALs, and fellow Marines tasked with weeding out insurgents by calling in potent firepower from those birds of prey above. I knew it would be a unique experience with a chance to see a different side of the Marine Corps. This was dirt in my boots and sweat on my rifle grip, twenty thousand feet below my comfort zone.

Initially, I thought the FAC position would be an unchallenging trip around the sun that gave me a glimpse of the “real” Marine Corps and guaranteed me a set of orders back into an F-18. It also cemented my being stationed in sunny San Diego, California, my favorite city, where my new bride of less than a year, Whitney, was currently awaiting my return. It was a win-win. Then Ramadi happened.

Mo and Doc patrolled with me that day. Mo, a young Marine lance corporal and radio operator, came with me on every mission. His job was to ensure we had good communications with everyone. Never farther than ten feet away, he carried a heavy load of radios and equipment, ready for use anytime we required it. Doc, my Navy corpsman, was a battle-tested medical expert with multiple deployments under his belt. Like always, I had placed the three of us in between two squads of about twenty Army soldiers conducting what was known as a “movement to contact.”

This mission was exactly what it sounded like. Led by an Army patrol leader, we moved through hostile areas, drawing out an enemy that loved to hide. When they engaged, we always reciprocated. It became routine for us to be in support of those patrols, and they could get nasty quick. Knowing we had an extra assist from the fighters up above felt reassuring. The Army was in charge. They planned, coordinated, and dictated the maneuvers for these missions. Mo, Doc, and I stayed close to the patrol leader and provided air support when he called for it.

When the sound of the initial mortars faded, I didn’t move, staying on one knee. I knew there were aircraft nearby, and I could bring them in for a closer look if we needed them. But having experienced this so many times before, I was pretty sure we didn’t. I rationalized my decision to do nothing, figuring I knew how the scenario would play out. This was Ramadi, and there was nothing I could do about it. If something changed, I could easily let the two F-18s that were airborne know what was happening.

The F-18 is a beast. As a veteran Hornet pilot with ten years in the cockpit and two combat deployments under my belt, I knew it like the inside of my eyelids. It had been the Marine Corps’ premier fighter attack jet for decades, and in Iraq, they were almost always close enough that you could barely count to a hundred “Mississippis” before they were in range.

They, along with the AV-8B Harrier jump jet, were the fast movers I'd call when things went south. But even when we weren't in too much trouble, talking to the jets was a good tactical move. It made me feel better for them to know what was going on. Plus, I knew many of the pilots personally and liked the chance to catch up, despite my obvious jealousy that they were in a much better place than I. That afternoon I didn't make the call. It was just another day in current life, another distant inaccurate mortar making noise as they always did.

I was almost dead wrong.

Not twenty seconds passed before a second round of explosions hit the ground. These were closer. Much closer. I could feel the concussion of the impacts now and winced at the volume of the thunderous detonation that rattled our brains and left us momentarily stunned. As my heart rate elevated, the remorse of having passed up my first chance to communicate with the Hornets set in, and I began to give more serious thought to reaching out to them and getting them headed in our direction. But now I compensated for my not having made a decision by overthinking it, all while staying out in the open down on a knee.

My mind raced. Why hadn't I called the planes earlier? Was my assumption that the initial mortars were so far away a bigger error in judgment than I'd thought? I needed to assess the status of my team and coordinate with the patrol leader to get his read on the situation, knowing that his intent as the ground commander would be a huge factor in the decisions I made moving forward. I finally started to scan the area to build my awareness and determine what to do next.

But before I finally acted, all hell broke loose.

A massive torrent of enemy machine gun fire erupted from the west over my right shoulder. Dozens of bullets buzzed just above my head. Tracers ripped past me, their telltale orange hue still visible despite the daylight as they strafed the air. They forced me down and to my left into a prone position, flat on my stomach, putting the source of bullets directly behind me. Almost in unison, the same thing happened from the east, as tracer flashes and bullets cracked over the top of me from the opposite direction. With waves of bullets crisscrossing directly above and beside me,

I was the meaty part of a cross-fire sandwich. In an instant, I lost control of the situation and was no longer able to do anything. Because I had done nothing to that point, I was now exposed.

Being the stellar Marine he was, Mo constantly mirrored my movements, so he was right where I needed him and the radios. Having followed my cues that day, Mo was now in the exact predicament I was, exposed in an open area, pinned to the ground, and unable to move. My inaction had put him in danger. Doc was already thirty feet ahead of me. He had pushed farther up after the initial volley to get to a more advantageous and protected location. Now he was safe, positioned behind a huge tree and kneeling in a small irrigation ditch that gave him cover from enemy fire. He was frantically gesturing and screaming for me to move to his position.

Because the Army squads were spread out in each direction over several hundred feet, there was no way for us to return fire. If we did, we would be putting dozens of soldiers, most of whom we couldn't currently see, at risk. Besides, I had no idea where the enemy positions were, just the direction from which the fire was coming. Fortunately, most of those guys had been ahead of Mo and me and had found cover like Doc did.

I had been shot at many times before and expected the fire to subside quickly after the initial attack, the way it usually did. Again, contrary to all my expectations, the situation got worse. Much worse. And once again my assumption led me down an incorrect path. After getting my bearings, I realized from the cracking of the bullets and heavy rate of fire that this wasn't a quick burst from an insurgent's personal weapon of choice, the AK-47. The deep and heavy *thud, thud, thud* revealed this was likely from heavier, belt-fed machine guns, and it wasn't slowing down. I was in the middle of a well-coordinated and sustained attack from both flanks, with no effective way to respond. I was stuck, and it was bad.

Lying face down in the dirt contemplating what to do, I swelled with regret over my failure to act. Why hadn't I pushed Mo and myself up to the safety of Doc's position? Why hadn't I called the aircraft the instant the first mortar fell? Why hadn't I been proactive in finding the patrol leader to assist in developing a plan? Why did I just kneel there and do nothing? Did I actually think, like some fortune teller, I knew what was going to happen?

My eyes met Mo's. He was also lying flat on his belly, looking directly at me. The ten feet of dirt and grass between us was being annihilated by bullets, with sand and rocks flying up and hitting us in the face. If I had reached my hand out toward him, I would have been hit immediately. There was almost no chance I would survive multiple rounds from the large-caliber weapons preventing me from moving. It felt like being trapped alive in a coffin. While I could still see everything around me, I was entombed by the firefight and in imminent peril. It was the complete opposite of everything I had trained for. I wasn't passing information, coordinating airplane attacks, providing communications, or directing fire support. I was neither being an example for my men nor giving them instructions. I wasn't leading at all. I was just lying there.

My mind raced to consider every possible reaction, each discarded the moment I considered it. We couldn't stand, slide, roll, crawl, or even raise our heads. There was nowhere to move. I could feel the bullets passing between us in waves. Then I could hear and feel them shift, moving closer to me.

I looked back at Doc out of the corner of my eye. I couldn't hear his voice over the sound of the machine gun fire but understood what he was saying. He kept waving his arm in a beckoning gesture that said, "Come this way." I wanted to get up and run but knew that the instant I sat up I would likely get my head shot off. The expression on Mo's face began to mirror my own feelings; panic had taken up residence in us both. We were terrified and screwed. There was nowhere to move, and the impacts of the bullets were inching closer to me. As they came to within a few feet, I gave up thinking about what to do. There were no good options left.

My thoughts left the pressing situation and went to my wife, Whitney, who was at home in San Diego. She was my favorite person in the world. Thoughts of being home with her consumed my mind. It was the middle of the night in California. I imagined her groggily stumbling to the door after being woken up by some somber Marine, ringing the doorbell to tell her I was dead. She would be devastated, and so angry at me.

"You better come home. You have to come home," Whitney repeated several times in the days before I deployed, each plea becoming more

emotional as my imminent departure grew closer. I laughed off her comments dismissively, an anxious tough guy's reassurance, but I understood her. She needed me to come back. "Don't be brave" was the last thing she told me before I boarded the bus at Camp Lejeune and began my journey to Iraq. That was her way of saying, "Don't do anything to get yourself killed."

In this moment, I felt neither brave nor like any kind of leader. By assuming that things would play out as they always had, I'd put myself, Mo, Doc, potentially scores of soldiers, and even my new wife in harm's way. My lack of action had been more than simply a bad judgment call. It was irresponsible. We were all at risk now, and my absence of leadership was about to land us all in body bags.

I felt a wave of utter resignation wash over me. I'd never anticipated having to admit defeat, but this was now a situation completely out of my control. I literally chuckled out loud, then lay there shaking my head, waiting to die. It was an odd sensation coming to the realization that there was no plan B, no contingency move, no next steps. As I winced at the dirt being kicked up by the bullets hitting the ground beside me, I started to wonder what it would feel like when I got shot through the bottom of my boots. I instinctively crossed my legs out of fear of the bullets hitting me where I least wanted them to. I thought of how badly it would hurt, not only myself, but the person I cared most about.

Whitney.

When the barrage of bullets got to within arm's length of me, I felt them shift up and over me. Call it chance or divine intervention, but it was as if the shooter had leaned back ever so slightly, raising the trajectory of the bullets by just enough inches to pass over me. This was the moment I was supposed to die. But miraculously that didn't happen, and within seconds the bullets were on the other side of my body, impacting the ground instead of me.

Desperate to not feel another second of helplessness, I leapt up, yelling at Mo to do the same, and sprinted straight ahead toward the irrigation ditch where Doc was sheltered and dove in. I landed on my side, then quickly rolled onto my back. Mo had followed my lead, and as the sky above me

came into focus, all 275 pounds of him and his gear landed on top of me face-first. All I could do was bear-hug him as we lay nose to nose, partly in an effort to pull him down as bullets hissed over us and partly out of sheer relief that we were both still alive.

Though we had plenty more maneuvering to do to fully resolve the situation, we were unscathed and essentially safe. I was no longer a victim of circumstance. I had finally led myself and my team out—barely.

LESSON: Every problem is a leadership problem

Our worlds are constantly bombarded by external forces, many of which feel out of our control. Much like the mortar attack I experienced in Ramadi, only perhaps less immediately lethal, we are regularly under the threat of outside influences that pose risks to our success. The economy shifts and prices rise. Competitors want to take our clients and eat into our market share. Larger firms try to block us from entering their industries. External regulators place excessive demands on our team.

And it's not just in business where we find these forces working against us. Bad weather slows our drives to the grocery store and ruins our outdoor wedding plans. We catch a cold before a weekend getaway or receive news about a loved one falling gravely ill. From the insignificant to the life-altering, these problems feel inevitable and beyond our control.

Although we cannot dictate all the circumstances around us, there is no excuse for being unprepared or irresponsible. All too often we disregard our ability to influence the outcome because we see a situation as beyond our control. We casually dismiss our responsibility with the refrain, "It is what it is." But that is the absence of leadership. Instead, we need to do the opposite.

We need to lead. Even when circumstances feel completely beyond our control, we still must act. Only then will we be positioned to exert our influence, which will drive us closer to determining the outcome. By leading, we can overcome the feeling of victimization and, instead, understand the range of options within our power.

By taking control of our preparation, reaction, and response to problems, we become leaders. When we reframe our mindset and see situations through the lens of leadership, we understand that things don't have to remain as they are. We can anticipate the challenges we may face, assess what our options are to solve them, then take action and execute. It can be scary to accept the responsibility of leadership because our actions—or inaction—may endanger others and worsen the situation. But good leaders, those who choose to step up and act, are rewarded with the most critical component—the solution.

Every single problem is a leadership problem. Potential risks quickly transform into unwelcome threats, creating a problem. From accounting for bad weather to leading Marines in combat, every problem we come across as human beings is a leadership problem. Every. Single. One. Because it is up to us—the leaders—to take action. *The most powerful aspect of embracing this fact is that it means leadership becomes the solution to every problem.*

Unfortunately, we are not born with the natural tendency to lead. It's easier to stand by and be a victim of the situation. Leadership is both a habit and a behavior that must be learned and cultivated. Only when that habit becomes ingrained do we instinctively connect the challenges we face to the leadership mindsets and behaviors that are required to solve them.

While it may seem hard to connect lying in a ditch in Ramadi to leading a business team, the lessons apply equally to both. You may be facing a barrage of bullets or competitor encroachment, and your leadership may be the sole factor that can avert or resolve the pressing issue. Try everything you can not to end up in a position where you have no options and ultimately relegate your circumstance to a zero-sum situation. Don't take a knee, accepting your defeat due to the challenges of the situation. Even if you don't know the immediate resolution, you must try *something*. Leaders know there's always something to be done when faced with a challenge. Doing nothing is a sin, even if you don't know exactly what to do.

If we give up and assume an outcome is inevitable, or believe there is no change we can effect, we succumb to the paralysis of those overwhelming external forces. Through assumption and inaction, we

eventually find ourselves in what feels like an unwinnable situation with no way to survive. We lament the helplessness we feel and simply focus on the final negative scenario, just as I did when I found myself face-first in the dirt, pinned down, just waiting for the bullets to pierce the soles of my standard-issue Danner combat boots. Problems seem unsolvable because we are inclined to do less and less as their impact grows and grows.

When no one leads, a void is created—a leadership vacuum. When that vacuum is felt, it's not long before bad things happen. Your team loses confidence and abandons ship, or worse, the bullets start flying at your head and you're admitting defeat. Clients have often asked me how to fix a problem once it has deteriorated to a point where no corrective options seem to exist. Unfortunately, there isn't a great answer to that scenario. There wasn't a good answer for me on that battlefield. But we don't ever want to be in that position, facing an existential threat with no good options. We want to solve that problem before it gets to that point. We want to lead all the time, from the outset. Leaders should be unafraid to make the tough, uncomfortable, or even impossible call because the alternative is worse. Doing nothing and accepting some inevitable outcome opens the vacuum and relinquishes their control.

A good leader fills that void. They don't wait around for something else to happen, for someone else to fix an issue, or worse, do nothing and let the situation implode. Often, catastrophic occurrences are prevented from ever happening by leaders who are proactive and aggressive with their actions. When leaders hold the line, they dictate the outcome of a situation, rather than the situation dictating the outcome to them. And yet, we take their leadership for granted until we are devoid of it and challenged by a true disaster.

Good leaders rarely find themselves in an impossible scenario and out of options. They see every problem as a leadership problem and search for a way to solve it. They are constantly assessing and maneuvering to help their team prevail. And if a challenging event can't be avoided, a strong leader knows that while he or she may not be able to change the external circumstance, they can respond by diminishing the negative outcomes. That still results in an action, whether it be a small gesture or a wholesale shift in

strategy. And even in the direst situations that have deteriorated to a place of near helplessness, those leaders know they always have control over their own attitude and how they respond.

We can always lead.

Leadership isn't a burden—it is an opportunity and obligation. It affords us power and influence and, as much as is possible, control. It gives us what we all want most—freedom. We gain the freedom to make decisions, and to determine in every way possible the outcomes of our lives. Leadership prevents us from being victims. It's how we mitigate the risks caused by external forces and pressures. It's how we avoid lying face down in the dirt waiting to die. It's how we win.

On that day in Iraq, I was lucky. But relying on luck or hoping circumstances will change on their own is not a good business plan, nor a solid approach to leading a team. And it's definitely not a good way to build a marriage or raise a family. Your luck will run out at some point, and you will end up a victim to your situation. The check engine light in your car won't go off on its own—you have to do something to fix it. The same is true everywhere. You need a strategy, some plan of action, when the external threats arise. You need to be leading through each aspect of life.

So, lead in every situation, under every circumstance, no matter how mild or severe or routine a problem appears. Don't wait, don't sit back, don't assume you have no course of action and become a victim of the world around you. Lead.

Real-World Application

"They don't care."

It was a phrase I'd heard many times before, too many to count. The older generation complaining that young people are not engaged, lack a good work ethic, and do not appreciate how good they've got it. A seasoned veteran remembers how he walked uphill both ways to school in the snow, with no shoes, while watching the new guy skate by, complaining. I understood immediately what Ken was saying.

But he wasn’t a random person yelling at kids to get off his lawn. This comment was made by a manager talking about members of his own team that he was directly responsible for. Ironically, he sounded like he didn’t care, either. Almost like he wasn’t even upset or concerned, and that there was nothing he could even do about it, that it was just a fact of life.

I was working with a utilities company based in the Midwest that had hired us to train their team. They were sizable, and had a good reputation by industry standards. This being a company town, their local workforce was robust. Many employees were second and third generation, and some had been with the company for decades. These were hardworking folks doing underappreciated work that literally kept the lights on.

Over the past three years, accident rates had started to creep up. It was an unsettling shift after the previous ten years had been the safest on record. Senior management noticed the unfortunate trend and wanted to stop it before it got any worse than the recent near-fatal incident that had occurred. A newer, young employee was fortunate to have survived a fall that had led to broken bones and a stint in the hospital. Thus, I found myself in front of Ken, a manager who’d had a few incidents happen on his watch and was struggling with team morale.

“This new generation is all the same. They’re on their phones constantly. They show up and expect things to magically happen. It’s nuts,” Ken continued. “Don’t get me started on their work ethic. They don’t care about anything.”

Ken’s rant went on, and I patiently listened to him vent.

“I don’t get these millennials. They’re nothing like the people I started with.”

Curiously, I was struck at how passive he was. I was no stranger to his narrative. “Millennials” was a word I had heard before. It was a catchall for anyone younger than the person describing them. But normally it was filled with frustrated exasperation and connected to descriptors like “lazy,” “entitled,” and “weak.” Oddly, Ken’s dissatisfaction seemed more matter-of-fact than emotional. It was just how it was.

So, I asked a few questions. “What do you think the reason is? Why don’t they care?”

“Beats me,” Ken replied, nonchalantly.

For someone who’d clearly done a lot of thinking about the attitudes of his team, he didn’t seem to have much of an idea as to why he thought what he did about them.

“Are they unsafe? Careless?”

“No, it’s not like that. It’s like they want things to just be handed to them. They want things to be easier. There’s no commitment. Trying to get them to stay late to finish a job is like moving a mountain. They won’t do it.”

I nodded as he played out the situation he had been dealing with.

“Really, they just want to work less and get paid more.”

I’m normally proud of my poker face, but Ken caught the curl on the edge of my mouth. So, he stopped talking.

“That’s crazy, right? Almost hard to believe. I mean what kind of person wants to work less and get paid more? Or have things be easier? Who could possibly want *that*?” Sensing my sarcasm, Ken chuckled. He understood how he was sounding.

“Look, I know what you mean,” I said, getting more serious. “It’s something I heard coming up in the ranks myself. Every generation doesn’t live up to the one that came before it. And this is an issue for every company we work with, trust me.”

We started talking more in depth about what he really felt was different about his team’s approach. These were able-bodied workers; physically, they didn’t have any problem doing the job. They had good minds, were smart and tech-savvy, and Ken even conceded that they were better than him with some of the digital-based equipment. They got the hang of things quickly when they put their minds to it.

“So, if they’re smart enough and physically able to do the job, what do you think it is?”

“That’s just the way they are. I can’t change them as people and so I just have to live with it. It is what it is.” Beyond that, Ken remained stumped.

So, I asked him, “Knowing what it is that we do, why do you think your company brought us in?”

I saw the light bulb begin to brighten.

“I know it’s leadership.” But he almost said it as a question, still not realizing completely that the responsibility of getting his team to work better started with him.

“Leadership,” I said, echoing his words definitively. “They need to be led.”

“You’re saying it’s my fault that they’re not motivated?”

“No, this isn’t about whose fault it is. It’s about what you can do to solve the problem. And maybe assuming this is how they are and that there’s nothing to be done about it might not be the truest statement. It sounds as though you’ve already written them off, without really knowing what makes them tick or trying to find out what they’re thinking.”

That part he understood.

“What have you done to try and fix this problem?” I asked.

“Honestly, not that much.” He shook his head. “Is there much I *can* do?”

“That’s a great question. Can we actually help motivate them? Get them to invest themselves? Find out why they’re not plugging in? Can we *lead* them?” I asked.

“Maybe. I guess I’m just not sure how to do that,” he admitted.

I didn’t respond, letting silence fill the room. By not talking, I gave Ken the time to think up a course of action on his own.

“I should talk with them, maybe? Ask them what they think of the job?”

“That’s a great start! Maybe even ask what brought them here in the first place. Investing in your people makes them feel valuable and reminds them that their contribution matters,” I encouraged.

I explained to him something we at Echelon Front call the “reciprocal nature of leadership,” which put simply means that what you give, you get in return. When you show that you care for your people, they reciprocate; they care in return. When you listen to your people, they listen in return. When you treat your people with respect, that respect is returned. And so on.

“I know it sounds simple. And it is. But this solution only works if you see this as a leadership problem. This isn’t about what’s wrong with them. They’re just people. If you can change your perspective, you’ll start to see

that you do have influence over their actions and mentality. Your leadership is the solution here. You have so much more control than you might think."

"Fair, and I can start by talking to them. But how do I get them to really care about the job?" he pushed.

"Well, what do you think a leader should do? If you want them to step up, what do you think you need to do?" I asked.

"I guess I have to help them understand why it matters, and why it's good for them," Ken offered.

"That's awesome!" I exclaimed. "And remember, what was the reason you brought us here in the first place?"

"Our safety issues," he lamented.

"Exactly. Do you think they care about their own safety?" I asked almost rhetorically.

"Of course they do," he quickly answered.

"Right on," I agreed. "So, lead them. And when they show they understand and care, they might even offer some ideas about—"

Ken cut me off. "I know that if we engage them, they'll feel more empowered. They use that word a lot," he said with a laugh.

"Indeed. It's a good word. They *will* be empowered, and will likely do a better job, which means accidents will dwindle. And everyone wins when that happens, including you," I said.

Ken and I spoke two weeks later and then another two weeks after that. In each subsequent meeting, I heard his attitude change for the better.

"I definitely have made some headway. I set up one-on-one meetings with everyone on the team. But not normal meetings in my office. I went down to the site and pulled them out for a coffee, just so I could talk to them with no distractions. I thought if things were more relaxed and casual, it would be better," he said.

"Great ideas," I told him.

He started by asking them about themselves, what they liked, and found out he had things in common with some of them. "One of my guys is a Red Sox fan, like me. We both loved Pedro Martínez. And one woman, her dad worked for my granddad. It's the whole reason she applied here. Isn't that crazy?"

A few even mentioned to him that no one had ever even engaged with them before. They had only experienced others being critical or judging them, which made them feel alienated. “No wonder they didn’t engage or care,” Ken said.

Not only had Ken’s leadership affected his team’s energy and attitude but it had improved his. “This might sound weird, but I really like a lot of these younger guys. And you were right—they have some good ideas. Some.” He chuckled.

“That’s awesome,” I said.

“We haven’t had any more accidents over the past month, and the team’s getting through their appointments quicker. No one’s making more money for doing less yet, but based on one of their suggestions, I’m recommending we develop a new app to log job visits and troubleshoot issues, because the current system we use is layered and inefficient.”

“Love it,” I told him. “Looks like they’re really responding to your leadership. That’s a win for everyone.”

It’s amazing the power you possess when you don’t assume outcomes and you act. Ken managed to break through to his team, and it had changed him and the team for the better.

Leading isn’t as hard as it can often seem. And if we’re not approaching a problem through the lens of leadership, our judgment and vision can be easily clouded and confused. In this case, the risk stemmed from a manager’s being happy to attribute the issue to something that was simply a fact of life and couldn’t be changed. His course of action was inaction. By doing nothing, he failed to lead, and the helplessness that followed came from the frustration of feeling as if everything was beyond his control.

A good leader fills the leadership vacuum and stops problems from consuming them. They anticipate the full range of issues that might get in their way, preparing their team members to position themselves optimally. Good leaders don’t accept that “It is what it is,” because they know they can control it. A good leader thinks every situation and solution through quickly instead of assuming a scenario’s outcome. They take decisive action before that situation gets out of hand. And a good leader knows that if there is a real problem, it’s because there’s been no real leadership.

2

HUMILITY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTE IN A LEADER

Quantico, Virginia
October 1995
Day 1 of Marine Corps Basic School Class 1–95

"TWO."

When I heard the number, my stomach flipped. Had I heard the company commander correctly? Was that possible? There were 250 of us—there had to be more.

Two. That's how many pilot slots were available in class 1–95. I hadn't even been at The Basic School (TBS), the first stop in a Marine officer's career, for as many days as that when I heard the number. My career hadn't even started, and now it appeared it might have already blown up. I scanned the auditorium, trying to determine from the looks on their faces who of the other 249 men and women in the room, absorbing the same information I was, wanted to be pilots. When we graduated TBS, we would all get a job—a military occupational specialty (MOS)—and there were a limited number of each to which we could be assigned. Once you were in that job, it was near impossible to change. Ever. I couldn't tell you how many slots there were for any other MOS. I'd stopped listening after the commander said "Two." I wanted to be a pilot. There was no plan B.

After watching the movie *Top Gun* when I was thirteen, something in my brain clicked. With the images of Maverick shooting down MiGs and landing the formidable F-14 Tomcat on a boat burned into my soul, the next

eight years of my life became laser-focused on becoming a carrier aviator. I had done everything required to become a Marine officer, and my path to this point felt straight but getting narrower by the minute.

Early in my senior year of high school, I'd received an Air Force ROTC scholarship to Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Arizona, with an attached guarantee of attending flight school. Only trouble was, I didn't want to be in the Air Force. Growing up with Marine Corps Air Station El Toro in my backyard, I obsessed about becoming a Marine. Ask anyone in the armed forces what they do, and they'll respond, "I'm in the Navy," or "I'm in the Army." There's only one branch where you aren't in the service, you *are* the service. You *are* a Marine. I didn't want to just fly jets in the military, I wanted to fly them in the Marines. I turned down my guaranteed free Air Force ride the same month I graduated high school. I'd have to get into the Corps another way.

At age seventeen, I marched into the Marine recruiting office and was told since it was late in the game, I'd have to go to college on my own dime and complete Platoon Leaders Class (PLC) as a member of the Ground Officer Program. The program that guaranteed a spot in flight school, Guaranteed Aviator Program, was already full, but I was told it'd be easy for me to make the switch down the line to try for jets. Had I understood what the recruiter meant by "easy," I might never have laced up a boot. Ignorance is bliss.

During my freshman- and junior-year summers at the California State University at Fullerton, I'd successfully completed PLC by attending Officer Candidate School (OCS) over two grueling, humidity-soaked six-week training stints in Quantico, Virginia. With that box checked off, and after I graduated college over the 2.0 GPA minimum, I was a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps. I was officially a Marine.

In October of 1994, I once again made the cross-country trek from Southern California back to Quantico, to matriculate through TBS with the illustrious Arctic Alpha TBS class of 1995. With everything I owned crammed into my Ford Mustang, I set out on what would hopefully be my final six-month stretch in Quantico, compliments of Uncle Sam. TBS, also known to Corps lieutenants as "The Big Suck," "Thousands Being Stupid,"

and various other colorful nicknames, would teach me, and every other newly commissioned officer since 1922, the fundamentals of military leadership. My twenty-one-year-old self was stoked to officially start my career in the branch I had longed to be part of since childhood.

How I did at TBS would dictate my entire future. I was one step away from a chance at my dream. That promise of an easy transition to the air program had become my own personal Everest. Two slots. I shuddered at the thought of having to pull artillery or inspect weapons systems for the rest of my career. What had I done? The only thing I ever imagined doing was flying jets. And I had less than a 1 percent chance of success.

Despite the grim odds, I was committed, and made earning one of the pilot slots my singular focus. Fortunately for me, of the lieutenants not already guaranteed an MOS, not everyone wanted to be a pilot. So, it turned out that I wasn't actually competing against all of my classmates. The odds were improving slightly. Since the slots would be given out based on class rank, the higher I graduated, the more likely I was to get one.

At TBS, everyone started on a level playing field. Naval Academy midshipmen, ROTC students, and PLC graduates like me were all viewed the same. By reputation, Academy students were the smartest. Everyone knew the caliber of person it took to be accepted into that selective and prestigious school. Merely to be considered, you needed a nomination from a member of Congress.

A PLC graduate on the other hand could come from any college in the country, from Harvard to Cal State Fullerton, with the latter being far more representative of the type of kid who populated the ranks of Marine officers. My ranking as a PLC second lieutenant with a political science degree from a local state college, while anything but prestigious, was typical. It also was irrelevant. The Corps didn't care where I came from. No deference or advantage was given to anyone, regardless of their pedigree. We were all the same in our superiors' eyes, and that suited me just fine.

Our company of 250 second lieutenants got broken into six platoons of roughly 40 people. Each platoon was the centerpiece of your training. We were split up alphabetically by last name, and I was assigned to 1st Platoon. While all of Alpha Company operated together at times, the bulk of the

instruction and the most intimate interactions took place inside the platoon. So, I got to know my 1st Platoon mates very well, very quickly.

We did everything together, including socialize on weekends. For me, little to nothing existed outside my TBS platoon. If your last name ended in A, B, or C, I formed powerful bonds with you, some of which endure to this day. By the same token, those were also the people I was competing against for my precious one-of-two MOS slot. Like a reality show contestant, I was engaged in this game of survival against others upon whom, at some point, I would likely come to rely, perhaps even with my life.

Captain John Marion, call sign "Cub," commanded 1st Platoon. He was the only staff member to have a call sign because he happened to be the only pilot in the company and the first F-18 pilot to ever be assigned a platoon at TBS. Mine. Cub carried the mantle of leader, role model, and de facto mentor as I learned to navigate the murky waters of my new environment. But any illusion that his status as a pilot might make him easier on us than other platoon leaders who were infantry officers quickly vanished like a vapor trail.

Instead, Cub told us that his objective as the first "jet-jock" to command a TBS platoon meant he was going to push us harder than even the company commander, himself an infantry officer. "This isn't a free ride for any of you," he said during his short introduction. After regaling us with stories of dropping bombs from his Hornet onto the famed Highway of Death in Operation Desert Storm, he explained his mission at TBS and why he fought for the coveted billet of platoon commander. "I wanted to be the first fighter guy to have this job, and I wanted to show that pilots can meet the same high bar set by our grunt brethren. So, stand by."

"Stand by" indicated that whatever we were about to do next was going to hurt, and Cub level-set early. It became a running joke across the platoon as those two words preceded virtually everything we did. Cub also had a very pointed warning for anyone already selected for pilot training. He theorized that those in his platoon with guarantees to flight school were usually the worst lieutenants. "We instructors have a nickname for you. FIGMAC. Which stands for 'Forget It I Got My Air Contract.'—the *F* may have had a slightly more colorful meaning. If I see you're a FIGMAC and

you don’t think you need to commit to what we are teaching here at TBS, I’m gonna weed you out,” he said.

Ironically, I sensed this would work to my advantage given my status as an aspiring aviator, rather than a guaranteed one. He understood more than anyone what it took to fly for the Marines, and I had a chance to prove myself to someone who would hold sway over whether or not it happened for me.

Students at TBS were assessed in three different categories: military skills, physical fitness, and leadership. Military skills covered everything from shooting a pistol to leading the platoon on a night patrol. Cleaning a rifle, finding the ideal placement for heavy machine guns, and loading frequencies into a radio were just a few of the dozens of military skills that had to be learned. We sat through a class, did some hands-on exercises, and took a test. There was no magic trick. If you listened, studied, and practiced, you would do well. Cub expected mastery from the entire platoon. And sure as hell, I was going to put in the required work to achieve it.

Physical training (PT), the second of the three assessment categories at TBS, was brutal and challenged even the fittest Marines. Cub quickly introduced us to the full gamut of his personal PT regimen. The obstacle course, combat conditions course, and the legendary endurance course—a six-mile run negotiating terrain and various fabricated barriers with full gear and weapons—were just some of the medieval tortures devised to keep us in shape. They also happened to be Cub’s training activities of choice for “platoon time.” This was essentially free time, scheduled at the discretion of Cub, who loved making us sweat on his watch. Challenges were timed and graded and used to measure our physical-fitness level. The expectation that a Marine lieutenant was physically fit was high, and PT evaluations came at us hard and heavy. Cub’s preparation took that into account, and we quickly acclimated to being victims of some of the toughest training runs in the company.

Cub made sure that 1st Platoon was a frequent visitor of the infamous “Yellow Brick Road,” a brutal quarter-mile-steep ascent hidden deep in the woods of Quantico. Almost daily we trod up that rocky path, our boots hammering out a collective cadence across the weirdly yellow pavement.

Cub would occasionally go so far as to run us in gas masks to give us what he called the full meal deal. If you watched the HBO series *Band of Brothers*, a retelling of the Army's 101st Airborne's heroic experience in the European theater during WWII, the Yellow Brick Road was our Currahee. That run both whittled us down and built us up, chiseling physical specimens from our former civilian selves. We may not have known it then, but we were Cub's clay, and he shaped us mentally, physically, and emotionally deep in those Virginia woods for what he knew would come next for us. To that point, I had never done anything physically tougher.

As rough as the PT was, the more critical measure was the third and final one, that of our leadership acumen. The instructors at TBS assessed not only what kind of teammate we were in support of the platoon, but also our ability to lead when assigned a specific role. Throughout TBS, we all rotated through leadership billets. A billet might put you in charge of a four-person team or the entire 250-person company. Regardless, you were graded and evaluated the entire time you occupied that billet. Naturally, Cub's dedication to preparing us as leaders equaled his commitment to shaping us physically. One of the Marine mottos he repeated endlessly was "Ductus Exemplo," Latin for "Leadership by Example." Emblazoned on the front of TBS headquarters, it served as a daily reminder of every Marine officer's duty: set the example.

Cub didn't just parrot the phrase—it was his credo. Unwavering, he set the best example he could in everything we did, and we followed his lead with the expectation that we'd form the same habit ourselves. He knew that regardless of where we went next, our ability to lead and to get our Marines to follow would decide our success or failure.

When combined, your individual scores in military skills, fitness, and leadership gave you an overall composite score that was used to generate your class rank. To do well at TBS, you had to excel in all three skills. A fast run time wasn't enough to offset getting lost on a patrol. Expertise on a weapons system wouldn't make up for being a poor leader. Being good at only one or two of the skills wasn't enough, especially if, like me, your expectation was to graduate toward the top of the class. To get that pilot slot I had to outperform everyone else in my company who wanted the same

thing. And as far as I was concerned, the competition would have to pry it out of my rifle-calloused hands.

While it might have been straightforward, TBS was a lot of material crammed into six months. There were dozens of graded evaluations in each of the assessed areas. That meant go fast on every run, shoot consistently straight on the rifle, do well on all the academic tests. When given a billet, complete all the tasks appropriate for it. Every single assessment had an impact on my overall class ranking. I put in the time, was in good shape, and performed well. If there was a tough billet, I volunteered for it, thriving on the responsibilities.

Our class rankings were public information. Grades were updated regularly and posted on a wall for everyone to see. To my delight, I was routinely hovering near the top of my platoon. Within the first few months I was ranked in the top ten of the entire company. Every time I looked at that board, I felt better and better about myself.

At TBS, a unique element of our leadership grade came compliments of our peers. Twice during the course, each lieutenant filled out an evaluation and assigned a score to every other member in the platoon. This grade directly affected our overall leadership standing. I knew this subjective ranking was part of our assessment, and I wasn't concerned at all. In fact, I was looking forward to my first peer review debrief from Cub. He was going to be impressed, and I awaited his praise. "I can't wait to see what they said about me," I thought as I walked into Cub's office.

Cub began by telling me my grades were excellent, that I currently ranked among the top of the entire company, and that he felt as though I'd make a fine Marine one day. As anticipated, I felt great. "I want to read to you what I think is the best summary of what your platoon thinks," he said. Keep it coming.

"Lieutenant Berke would be one of the best Marines in the platoon … if he didn't already think that he was."

His words instantly made me feel sick. I started sweating. Shock and embarrassment consumed me. I'm sure the look on my face told Cub exactly how I felt. He said nothing, but simply stared at me, waiting for the

truth to make maximum impact. Sometimes silence is the most effective form of leadership, and Cub seemed to understand that perfectly.

In the quiet, I stripped back all pretense and tried to consider what had led to this moment. It didn't take me long to realize that despite my stellar grades and ranking, ironically, the only place I struggled was in my role simply as a member of the platoon. I liked contributing to the success of the team, but the longer I was at TBS and the better I did, the bigger my ego grew. If I was confident when I arrived, I was downright cocky when I found myself excelling. I was awesome and everyone saw it. I thought my friends were awesome, too, especially since I hung out only with those I thought were exemplary Marines like me.

The problem was that I rejected anyone who I didn't think fit the bill. If I believed you were a substandard performer, or "unsat" as we called it, I let you know it. I became more dismissive of, and often ignored, the underperformers. I would overtly express my dissatisfaction at the way members of my own team performed, especially if they were currently in a leadership billet. I didn't know it at the time, but my attitude was causing me trouble and had earned me a bad reputation from others in my platoon.

After an excruciating minute, Cub read it again: "Lieutenant Berke would be one of the best Marines in the platoon … *if he didn't already think that he was.*"

Now I felt panic—the type a child feels when he's been caught doing something wrong—begin to grow. I remembered the second day of TBS and the commander barking out the number.

Two.

I felt my future evaporating. As I struggled to regain my composure, Cub finally started talking, reminding me that the other Marines in my platoon were my peers, my teammates.

"Negativity doesn't just hurt other people—it hurts you," he said. When others struggled, he reminded me, they didn't need criticism, they needed help. "When it comes down to it and you need help, these are the people on whom you will have to rely. You'd better make sure they'll want to," he said.

Cub's words forced me to step back and take a hard look in the mirror at how I was conducting myself. Ironically, had I simply followed the basic expectations the Marine Corps had tried to inculcate in me, I would have been fine. Meaning, if I saw someone on my team struggling, all I had to do was help them. Instead, I passed judgment and watched them struggle. When I did that, I was also hurting myself. That their failures were also my failures never crossed my mind. In fact, I saw it as the opposite and felt like it made me look better. But I was wrong. Their struggles didn't make me look better, they hurt me and the team. *My* team!

Despite all the accurate shooting, fast runs, and good grades, I was failing TBS where it mattered the most. I was not a leader, certainly not of my peers. As a leader, it's not enough if you're the best shooter or battle strategist or if you finish an obstacle course first. If no one follows you into combat, you are useless.

Self-awareness can be a bitter pill. For the first time in my life, I realized my ego had become a problem, and it was time to become better acquainted with the word "humility." I needed to reassess what it meant to be part of a team, putting myself and my wins aside and putting others first. At twenty-one, this wasn't easy, but Cub's advice was a slap in the face, and I knew I never wanted to get feedback like that again.

Changing the way I treated other Marines in my platoon became my priority. I started looking to the best Marines for the example I needed to follow. What I noticed was that those Marines were the ones with the best relationships and were willing to help anyone who needed it. Cordell Bennigson, a 1st Platoon lieutenant who was guaranteed a trip to flight school, was someone I did my best to mirror. As I watched, I saw that he never treated those who were handling a task poorly as if there was something wrong with them. He knew they had gone through the same screening process he had. They were smart, motivated, and accomplished. They deserved to be there the same as everyone else. He respected that they had equally earned the coveted title of "Marine." I gauged my behavior against his, and credit him with helping show me the full measure of what it meant to be a good leader. I count him as a close friend to this day.

Quickly, my behavior changed. Instead of being frustrated with the poor performers, I tried to find ways to help them. I would carry a heavier weapon on a patrol if someone couldn't manage it. I cleaned extra gear after a week in the field if my squad was falling behind. I reviewed questions to prepare someone unsure of the material for a test.

Truthfully, most of what I was now doing wasn't drastically different from before. The real change was my intent. Instead of going the extra mile to show that I was better, I started doing it to help others. And I learned that it needed to come from an altruistic place, because helping people isn't a tactic to get what you want. It's a natural behavior that comes from subordinating your ego, being humble, and truly caring about the people around you. When I saw them as my teammates, people on whom I relied, it was so much easier to do the right thing.

Two months later, the second round of peer reviews reflected that I was more humble, likable, and a better teammate. The change in me had been measured and noticeable, and not just by others. I felt better about how I conducted myself as a Marine. There was tremendous satisfaction in being of service to someone other than myself, and that shift in attitude ended up giving me more than I could have anticipated. There is no greater pride than seeing someone you've helped succeed.

A few weeks before graduation, every lieutenant in Alpha Company lined up according to rank to select their MOS. I was the eighth Marine to step up to the board. Cub shook my hand, looked me in the eye, and said, "Congratulations, Lieutenant Berke, you've earned your shot at the cockpit of an F-18 Hornet. You're going to Pensacola to start flight training." I'd pulled the second pilot billet for my class.

I got the second of the two spots.

LESSON: When our ego gets out of control, our leadership suffers

Our ego disguises itself as an ally. It is our sense of self-worth, and by itself, it isn't necessarily a bad thing. Our ego enables us to persevere

through tough times and accomplish difficult tasks, especially when the odds are against us or others believe it can't be done. By bolstering your self-esteem, your ego can be a powerful force in achieving lofty goals and navigating challenges.

But when it gets out of control, it becomes our enemy. It acts as a vigilant defense mechanism. It tells us not to accept blame for mistakes because it wants to shield us from the consequences. We don't admit that we don't know something because our ego doesn't want us to look dumb in front of others. It resists apologizing for missteps so we don't look weak. Our ego intends to shield us from our insecurities because it loves us. Instead, it overcompensates, convincing us that we're great.

As we say at Echelon Front, your ego loves you, and if you listen to it, it will love you to death.

When we don't keep our ego in check, we don't listen to others. And when we don't listen, we don't learn. We don't evolve. We don't change or get better, and we begin to alienate the people around us. Our ego leads us down a destructive path that kills the most important thing in our life—our relationships.

Like eating a sugar-coated donut, our ego satisfies and energizes us in the moment. We don't recognize the negative effects of this indulgence in the short term. But when you habitually succumb to the craving, your ego takes over, and you relinquish control to a destructive force that sets you up to fail. Because in every case, our ego tells us what we want to hear, not what we need to hear.

The voice of ego insists that "I am right," "I am the best," and "They don't belong here." It overcompensates for the whispers of our insecurity telling us, "I am not good enough." But the voice of humility says, "I am capable, but I can always be better."

So, how do we remain humble when our destructive tendencies are so loud?

You must recognize the sound of your own ego and keep it in check. Hear what it's telling you, and actively choose to disregard what it says. When you refuse to listen to your ego, you not only subjugate your selfish interests but also prioritize the team's well-being ahead of your own.

Arrogant leaders put themselves first, and the more their ego gets out of control, the more self-centered they become. The worst of these leaders, often called egomaniacs, help their team the least and eventually struggle the most. This is what I fell victim to at TBS. I was so afraid of not securing one of those hard-earned pilot seats that my ego got out of control. I estranged my peers and lost the ability to honestly assess what I had become.

But you do not have to fall into the same trap as I did. When you focus on the people around you and help them win, you naturally build more humility and confidence. By stepping away from yourself and building relationships with the team, you learn from them and expand your capabilities. Everyone contributes to the success of the team, not just select individuals.

Without serving and supporting their team, a leader cannot accomplish their mission. When the team wins, everyone wins. So, the opposite stands: When the team fails, everyone fails. When taking on an organizational leadership role like manager, supervisor, director, lieutenant, or any other title, your job is ensuring success. These positions require you to be a leader who takes care of all the members of your team, especially the ones who struggle. A good leader will provide the resources, training, equipment, time, and understanding needed for their team members to be able to do their job. The team will notice the leader’s selfless approach, which builds trust and strengthens relationships. A leader who puts the team ahead of himself or herself will succeed. Humble leaders know this.

But more than anything, a humble leader knows there is constant room for improvement. And when you understand how you can improve, you can act. Humility allows us to be aware of and evaluate these faults, rather than using our ego to hide behind them.

Name: Date:

ECHELON FRONT

BALANCE ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Assess yourself as a leader in your implementation of the 4 Laws of Combat. The goal is to recognize where you are out of balance. Be honest and identify areas for growth and improvement.

Cover and Move

Teamwork, rather than the individual, is paramount. Breaking down silos to promote mutually supportive efforts to achieve overall mission accomplishment and success for the organization.

	Too little		Balanced		Too much
1	Doesn't fully understand the mission of other teams	Partially understands the mission of other teams	Completely understands all aspects and missions of other teams and peer leaders	Understands other teams' missions better than your own	Understands everyone else's mission significantly better than your own
2	Provides support to other teams when directed to	Responds to requests for support from other teams	Provides proactive, timely, and effective support to other teams whenever needed	Provides support that occasionally interferes with other teams' efficiency	Provides unsolicited support that can interfere with other teams' efficiency
3	Does little to develop relationships with other team leaders	Develops relationships with some but not all other leaders and teams	Goes the extra mile to establish and maintain good relationships with other team leaders to ensure mission success	Sometimes "puts off" other leaders with uncollaborative behavior	Steps on toes of other leaders, and doesn't form effective relationships
4	Concerned about own team's mission and prioritizes it above overall mission success	Feels own team's mission is more important than other teams	Perfectly balances support of other teams with achievement of own team's mission	Support of other teams sometimes impacts own team's ability to execute	Spends so much time focused on other teams, own team is ineffective in executing mission

Image Courtesy Echelon Front. For a digital version visit www.academy.echelonfront.com

Description

If self-assessment had a nemesis, it would be the ego. The ego does not suppose any problem might lie within but instead seeks to place blame externally. Shoving the ego aside, we can successfully ask ourselves, "What is truly going on? Where is my responsibility and ownership in this situation? Can I be doing something differently? How can I improve? Where am I out of balance? How can I be of service to my fellow Marines instead of thinking I'm superior to them?" All the questions we must ask ourselves get stifled when our ego takes over. And without that brutally honest self-assessment, failure becomes imminent.

We all have lessons to learn. Humble leaders tell themselves the truth and continually assess their own performance and that of their team. Confident leaders remain open to feedback and act when adjustments are needed.

The premise of "a perfect person" is sheer fiction. Even in fiction, we write off characters without flaws as two-dimensional and unbelievable. So,

if you acknowledge your flaws as opportunities for growth, your humility becomes your greatest attribute as a leader. Failure comes from ignoring your shortcomings, not admitting them.

Real-World Application

“I’m just being honest. If they can’t handle the truth, that’s on them,” Brian said.

Brian was a recently promoted branch chief and one of the most talented young leaders at an IT company that partnered with Echelon Front to train their Hi-Pos, or high-potential young employees. Brian displayed intelligence and confidence, proved hardworking, and was incredibly motivated—all the qualities the IT company revered. His bosses assured me he had a bright future ahead of him, but he had started having issues with some members of his team shortly after joining them. He set a high standard for himself and was a smart engineer but wasn’t afraid to frankly speak his mind. They asked me to come in and see if I could offer some suggestions to help Brian be a better leader.

“I hear you,” I replied. “Honesty is critical, and we have to tell the truth.” Instantly I saw a red flag, and became skeptical of how his honesty was being interpreted by his coworkers. “How does that go over with the team, when you tell them what you think?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I do a good job, and my boss knows I get things done. I don’t think it’s that big of a deal. When other people drop the ball, I call it like it see it,” he said.

“When you share your observations with the team do you get the sense they’re hearing your feedback?” I dug a little deeper.

“Can’t say. But I’m not really that worried about it,” Brian said definitively, becoming increasingly defensive.

My current line of questioning wasn’t connecting, so I tried a different tack.

“What are some of the issues you call your peers out on?” I asked.

“Nothing major. Just when they’re late, or the job isn’t done to standards. Our clients pay a lot of money, and things need to be done right,”

he said matter-of-factly.

“Totally agree,” I confirmed. “But how do they react when you tell them they’re not getting things done?”

“I’m no mind reader, but maybe they don’t like it, I guess. But sometimes the truth hurts.”

“Indeed,” I agreed. “But who does it hurt?” I asked.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said, then abruptly told me he had to get on a client call and needed to end the session. I could tell that Brian had shut down, so I told him we’d continue to talk later.

As part of his selection to the Hi-Po program, Brian had just completed a 360-degree review which contained feedback from his bosses, peers, and subordinates, the full spectrum of his coworkers. To gain some perspective that my conversation with Brian lacked, I read through his reviews.

“If the team runs into problems Brian says we should be coming to him with solutions, not just the problems. He gets so worked up about it that I stopped going to him at all. He doesn’t so much encourage as bully,” one teammate shared.

Another teammate revealed, “Even if you’ve gotten all your work done, if anyone leaves before Brian does, he always makes a comment about you taking off early. We all work really hard, not just him.”

Clearly, there was a disconnect between Brian’s opinion of how things were going and that of his teammates. When I thought about how to best communicate the reality of his situation to Brian, I thought about Cub and my peer evaluation at TBS. It was still tough to acknowledge even all those years later.

When Brian read his peer reviews, he was floored. He looked over them several times and struggled to believe them at first.

“I don’t get it. When I say this stuff, I’m not wrong. How is it that I’m the bad guy here?” he asked. I could see his wall of pride growing. No one likes to be thought badly of, and when we learn that we might be, our ego swoops in as a life preserver.

“You’re right. It is better to bring solutions to a problem instead of just the problem, and we should make sure we’re putting in the hours. But some people struggle with different issues than you do,” I said.

Brian looked both confused and a bit defeated.

“Let me ask you this: When you give someone harsh feedback about their performance, does it help them? Do they appreciate it? Does it give them something to improve? Is it well received or does it just frustrate them and make them not want to listen to you?”

“I guess I’m not sure. I never thought of it like that before,” he replied. Cracks started appearing in the wall.

“That’s fair. So, let’s flip it around. How do you react when people are critical of you?” I asked, referencing the evaluations he now held in his hand.

Brian said nothing. Nor did I, the silence serving my purpose better than any words could.

“I don’t like it,” Brian eventually said. The point had finally made impact.

“So, maybe there’s a better way?”

Brian gave this question some thought, then responded. “Maybe instead of giving someone a hard time about leaving early I could ask if there’s a situation that I could help them with or ask questions instead of just thinking they’re not working hard enough,” he said.

“That sounds like a good start,” I replied.

There would be more work to do, but Brian had embraced the message and I believed we were now on the right path.

Two weeks later when I followed up with Brian, I asked him how things were going, and if he’d had an opportunity to implement what we discussed. He told me how he flipped the script and almost immediately started seeing a noticeable difference in his team’s attitude. That included his own.

“It’s easier to work with my team now,” Brian said. “They come to me with problems and we troubleshoot them together. If there’s an issue, I think about how I’d like someone to approach me, and that’s how I handle it. They even asked me to come out for a beer after work a couple of nights ago. They’ve never done that before.”

He was surprised at how easy it was.

“I understand,” I said. “I’ve been there.”

Subordinate the ego, act from a place of humility and leadership, put the team first, and they will follow, on any battlefield.

3

COMPLACENCY IS A KILLER

Naval Air Station Fallon, Nevada
TOPGUN training range
May 2005

OUR THIRD FIGHT OF THE DAY WAS DONE. “Knock it off. Knock it off,” we both called out, the standard language over the radio to end the engagement and reset for the next. Thus far, all three fights were evenly matched.

It was an insanely clear day in northern Nevada. With the sun high overhead, a razor-sharp line cut between sky and earth on the horizon. This was an ideal day for every fighter pilot’s favorite mission, Basic Fighter Maneuvers (BFM). Dogfighting. One-on-one. Pilot versus pilot.

BFM lays the foundation all fighter pilots build from. It is how a pilot learns the absolute limits and capabilities of the machine he or she flies. It explores the flight regimes that define optimal maneuvering and exposes the place where controllability meets departure—where a plane is no longer responding to a pilot’s inputs. While flight manuals do a good job of defining those boundaries in theory, they cannot relay the experience in practice. Manuals don’t teach feel. There’s no text that appropriately conveys rumble, buffet, wind noise, shuddering, or any of the other seat-of-the-pants sensations that only come from manipulating your jet right up to, and sometimes beyond, the physical limitations of the machine.

To understand those limits, you need to do a lot of BFM. A lot. And at TOPGUN, that’s exactly what we did. And unlike taking reps in a gym or

training for a 5K, you'd never hear one of the students or instructors complain. It's unadulterated fun.

The origins of aerial combat trace back to the beginnings of WWI, where the likes of Manfred von Richthofen—more notoriously known as the Red Baron—terrorized the skies in his infamous Fokker Dr. 1 triplane and racked up eighty air combat victories. Eddie Rickenbacker became America's hero and a Medal of Honor recipient while scratching out twenty-six airborne victories for the European Allies. These godfathers of fighter aviation created the legend which history remembers to this day in modern dogfighting tactics.

BFM remains the mantle on which pilots hang their reputation. Rightly or wrongly, how one performs in a one-versus-one matchup is often considered the benchmark by which that fighter pilot's skill becomes measured. Ironically, it's one of the simplest and shortest missions you can plan and fly in a jet. For modern combat, it is a rarity.

American pilots haven't engaged in a real close-in dogfight with a capable enemy since Vietnam, when the F-4 Phantom II dueled nose to nose with the Russian-made MiG 17, 19, and 21 high above the Gulf of Tonkin. The far more common missions of air-to-ground strike interdiction, close air support, and armed reconnaissance might sound less sexy but prove more challenging, complex, and pertinent. And still, the validity and importance of dogfighting remains.

If you can get the better of your competition in a dogfight, you earn credibility, one of the most critical attributes of a successful fighter pilot. Credibility is like currency for pilots looking to earn their way to an advanced school like TOPGUN and become influencers in a fighter squadron, where other pilots willingly listen to your feedback. While the need for credibility rings true in every profession, it becomes heightened when lives hang in the balance. No matter if you're in a cockpit twenty-five thousand feet up or behind a desk at a computer, you have to prove to both senior managers and subordinates that they can rely on you.

Just like you've seen in the movies, BFM is regularly flown between instructor pilots, or IPs, and students as part of the TOPGUN syllabus. This allows IPs to evaluate the newly arrived candidates' ability to optimally

control their machines in a dogfight and to teach and explain how to do it. But in between classes, like we were on that beautiful May Nevada day, BFM was flown to maintain instructor proficiency. When instructors fought against each other, we elevated our game. We used it to ensure we were a hundred percent ready for the arrival of the students, whose very first flights would be one-versus-one against us.

We also used these dogfights to calibrate the pecking order—an unspoken, informal, yet understood ranking among the staff of twenty-five highly talented, and highly competitive, pilots. If you thought competition between the young guns was fierce, you can bet the ones teaching them still carried that same fire in their belly and wanted to smoke the boss.

As the Training Officer (TO), the senior pilot on the staff, I knew a few things about that pecking order. First was that it existed, and it mattered. It represented a healthy competition among the staff. Second, and more important, I knew I wasn't at the top of it. Third, anyone who thought they were, wasn't. Learning that lesson always got delivered the hard way for the few arrogant pilots who believed their own hype. But I was up there toward the top, while humble enough to know I'd never sit at the perch. Still, being good mattered, and I always wanted to get better and climb up that pecking order. The fight I was in that blue-sky day in Nevada would be the best I could ask for.

My opponent was Tom Downing, the Commanding Officer (CO) of TOPGUN, call sign "Trim." He was the stuff of legend. A three-time instructor, and my current boss and closest mentor, he enjoyed one of the best reputations in all of Naval Aviation. Working for and with him was something I didn't take for granted.

TOPGUN's CO and TO share a special relationship. Trim, being a former TO in one of his previous stints at the schoolhouse, knew my role and responsibilities well. He entrusted me with running the course, a monumental responsibility. That I was a Marine made it unique. There were only three of us on staff. Trim loved Marines. We were tight. We still are, to this day.

Instead of flying every day, Trim was usually busy dealing with "other matters," as he liked to call them, things well above my pay grade. As the

senior instructor, I ran the day-to-day operations at TOPGUN. I was close to the action, and I flew more hops than he did. He was always getting pulled up to headquarters to do whatever old Navy officers do when they're in command.

For me, I was in my prime, as proficient as I was ever going to be. Running TOPGUN was the best job in the world, as far as I was concerned, and I was qualified in not one but two jets at the same time. The Air Force's F-16 Fighting Falcon could pull almost as many Gs as the fingers on both hands and was more powerful than anything I'd flown to date. And I had the good fortune of being in the first class of Marines to train in it. The F-18 Hornet, while less powerful than its F-16 cousin, was nimbler and more maneuverable. I had spent the last three years dogfighting in them both. Asking me to pick a favorite would be like having to choose between my kids. Couldn't do it.

Without administrative requirements in my purview, I had more time to hone my skills behind the stick. Did that mean I was unbeatable? No. Not even close. But by sheer volume of seat time, to any bookie in Vegas I owned a slight advantage. That two senior guys were both available to fight was a rare occurrence. Yet here we were.

Game on, at ten thousand feet.

To this point, the day was a draw. Turn after turn, the absolute limits of our bodies and aircraft were reached, without either giving an inch of advantage to the other, neither pilot yielding in spite of us both pulling so many Gs it felt like an eight-hundred-pound gorilla sitting on your chest and the blood being violently sucked out of your face.

All three fights in which we'd already engaged ended the exact same way they started—neutral. Even. Perfectly matched to one another. Between Trim and me, there was no superior offensive position to be had.

So far.

I felt eager for the fourth and final set. We were fighting only minutes from the airfield in a coveted piece of airspace called B-20, a stretch of God's country about twenty miles due north on the I-95 from the Naval Air Station Fallon, home of TOPGUN. Our proximity to base allowed us to use almost all our gas in the fight itself, instead of preserving it for the flight

home. We could fight to the lowest fuel level possible, just over a thousand pounds, and basically glide back to the runway on fumes and still stay within the rules.

Those rules are set for every pilot's safety. For example, the parameters include: the pilot with their nose high takes the high position, having a minimum amount of fuel upon return to base, and no aggressive defensive maneuvers below the soft deck. Once you're in the sky, there are two limiting components: a soft and hard deck. Set at five thousand feet, the hard deck acts as the ground. There is no flying or going below it to snag a kill. If you do that, you're figuratively a smoking hole in the ground. The soft deck lives at ten thousand feet.

There are fighting limits. Speed can be no slower than 115 knots, about 130 mph. Instructors restrict these maneuvers because departing your jet—pushing it beyond its limits such that it no longer responds to pilot inputs and stops flying—is not something you want to happen close to the actual ground. The soft deck exists to allow pilots time to recover their aircraft in the event of a departure, like a flat spin. But above ten thousand feet, anything goes.

As instructors, Trim and I may have pushed the limits of those rules—ever so slightly. In this instance, though we were low on fuel, we knew we would make it back safely. So, we were able to squeeze out a fourth fight instead of the usual three. Unencumbered by fuel tanks, bomb pylons, or any extra weight at all, the jets were going to light up the sky like banshees. Slick as snot.

We started the final set the same, a mile apart, at ten thousand feet, flying over 400 mph. In what is known as High Aspect BFM, we briefed a cooperative setup. Meaning, we were going to meet head-on, with all factors equal. No one would be given the advantage until after the fight started. Whoever came out as victor was going to have to earn the win. No extra speed, no extra altitude, and no excuses if you lost. A neutral start.

Like a hawk, I'd watched Trim's jet nearly every second of each of the preceding fights. I'd analyzed how he moved, his tendencies, where he liked to go, and how he controlled his machine. He flew like I did, loved turning across your tail to make him hard to see. He used the vertical space

above him like an artist. And he must have had insides made of steel, because he could sit on a turn and tolerate the Gs better than most anyone I'd seen. While impressed, I was anxious to start the final set, putting all my reconnaissance to good use, anticipating his maneuvers with the hopes of taking advantage of any opportunity he presented.

"Snake 1, speed and angels on the left," I announced into the radio, indicating I was set at the planned airspeed and altitude.

"Snake 2, speed and angels on the right," he echoed, in perfect cadence.

"Set tapes to HUD," I ordered to ensure our cameras were recording our front canopy head-up display, both of us hoping the other's aircraft would eventually appear there and be caught on video for posterity's sake.

"Tapes," he acknowledged.

"Turning in," I called as we started our level turns toward each other to set up our wingtip-to-wingtip high aspect pass that would happen precisely five hundred feet apart, our closest legal point of approach during BFM. I tugged on the canopy handlebar, pulling myself perfectly upright in my ejection seat, shook out my hands, rolled my head in a few circles to stretch out my neck, exhaled deeply, and locked my eyes on my opponent, waiting for our two jets to merge and the impending fight to begin.

"FIGHT'S ON!" we both barked into the radio as we screamed past each other.

And, oh, it was on.

I slammed both throttles forward to full afterburner, both engines spitting bright orange flames from the tail of my F-18 and tapping into every ounce of the thirty-six thousand pounds of thrust the engines could muster. I rolled hard to the left, smoothly but quickly pulled all the way back on the control stick, and commanded an 8.1G maximum performance turn across Trim's tail, the pressure stretching the skin on my face back like a contorted Halloween mask. Craning my head over my shoulder, I could see he had done the same. As expected. It was milliseconds, but there was time to analyze and consider my next move.

I let the nose drop ever so slightly below the horizon, stealing just a bit of gravity to help maintain my speed while trying to be precise with the G and back stick pressure. Our two F-18s whirled around each other, circling

like boxers in the ring, sizing up the other before they come to blows. Our jets shuddered under enormous G-Forces that both scrambled our insides and tried to peel the metal off the plane.

With giant vapor clouds exploding above the wings, I scanned back and forth between my jet and Trim's. Looking over my left shoulder, I strained to see him: his bank angle, his turn rate, his nose position, his speed—all the measurements I could pull from whatever I could see at that distance. My legs and core stayed tense, my breathing timed perfectly to fight against the Gs and to force as much blood into my head as possible to keep my vision clear.

As the blood starts to leave your brain, the world loses color. Grayout, while unsettling, isn't uncommon. It's your body telling you you're a little behind the Gs. Anti-G Straining Maneuvers, or AGSM, are designed to keep the blood where you need it most: your head. It's a series of movements including squeezing your thighs and butt and blocking your throat with the "hook" technique, closing the space between the throat and glottis, thereby trapping the air in your head by saying the word "hook" every three seconds. Wait too long to get back in order, things turn black, and you pass out.

Simultaneously, rapidly, I scanned my instruments for split-second glances at my own jet's speed, G, bank angle, altitude, airspeed, and everything else that mattered. Look out, assess, glance in, assess. Micro-adjustments were made constantly, whether it was a change in angle, adjusting how high or low the nose was on the horizon, or making an adjustment on back stick pressure.

I wanted this win, so I pushed hard as the Gs crushed me, my breathing and heart rate increasing, my vision turning slightly gray. "Hook," I said, stopping hard on the K to trap the air, trying to regain control of my body. The lighter jets, as this one now was, gutted the air in a way I rarely got to experience, and I could feel the increased performance that came from being so low on fuel. The Hornet explored its full potential while I, now its captive audience, did my level best to keep up. What a machine.

As we approached the end of our circles and swung around toward each other's noses, another high aspect merge came to bear, and along with it a

chance to assess any advantage I may have gained, even if just a few inches. Each merge gave us the perspective to compare the position of our jets. We would blow right past each other. Instead of contorting myself as I had been doing, to see Trim as a small dot on the horizon, now I would get the full profile of his warbird, and I could measure it perfectly as he scorched past.

At the first merge, I assessed a difference of about ten degrees and maybe five to ten knots. A tiny variation given the violent 360-degree turns we had just seared through the heavens. It was small, but I had an advantage.

Across each other's tails we went again. Slower this time but, given how light our jets were, they were still explosive. Fire pouring out of our engines, like two dragons sizing one another up, our Hornets carved another set of circles in the sky.

Merge two passed in a similar flash, the flight controls clawing even harder into the thicker air as we descended. Our engines pushed harder as the burners enjoyed their own benefit from being close to the ground. Fire loves oxygen. My advantage grew.

Whoomp, across the tails we went again, slower yet, and now about three thousand feet above the hard deck. It was time to reorient the fight.

I pulled full aft stick, stomped full left rudder, and slammed the stick to the left, throwing the nose of my Hornet across to the opposite horizon in what we called a redefinition. From there it was full back stick, capturing precisely a thirty-five-degree angle of attack, the optimal position for the tightest turn, to avoid the hard deck and preserve every inch of positional advantage I had earned.

Trim matched my move exactly as we turned our circles pointed downward this time, instead of across the horizon, slower, tighter, the Earth ever closer. The next merge was coming, so both of us pulled out of the bottom of our half circles.

By this third merge, I wasn't really measuring so precisely anymore. I was offensive, and had more angles and more altitude, carried more speed. I had seen this hundreds of times before, just never with Trim. In my head, I knew how this would play out. It was time to loop over the top of him in a

move he couldn’t counter. It would give me an exclusive altitude advantage I would use to set up a shot.

Now I could take my eyes off him briefly as I set up my jet for the loop. A quick push forward on the stick gave me a little extra speed. I was pushing 115 knots and accelerating. Slow, but not too slow for the Hornet to go over the top. Once I cleared vertical, I would have all of God’s beautiful gravity assisting me back down.

As the Gs released me from their grip, I caught my breath and leveled focus on my jet. Blood swirled back into my brain as I rested it for a few seconds back on the headrest and carefully coaxed the plane up and over, and into attack position.

As I approached the apex, the highest point of my ascent, I looked back and over my shoulder, scanning for where Trim would be. Knowing his location would help me reorient my nose as I came back down the other side of the loop and aligned my gunsight.

He wasn’t there.

I flashed over the other shoulder. Not there, either.

My head shot back and forth once more. Trim had vanished.

I craned my neck straight up far as it would bend, looking directly behind me, verifying that the impossible hadn’t happened.

Only it had.

There was Trim, perched precisely one thousand feet behind me, as if attached to my plane like a glider by a tether, latching him into the textbook position to finish the fight. The nose of his Hornet presenting a view I had seen many, many times before but didn’t want to today. He was in the gun envelope.

As I’d brought my jet up after the last merge, he had looped along with me, reversed his flight path, and turned tightly inside the arc I had flown through the sky, bringing his jet to rest in the only place he could shoot me.

Game over.

Trim, old-school fighter pilot, legend, part-time comedian, and father figure to every instructor at TOPGUN, keyed the microphone. He didn’t gloat. He wasn’t calling his shot, verifying his accuracy, or announcing me

dead like standard radio protocol dictated. All I heard was laughter, and it was awful.

Mercifully, the flight home took only minutes. We met on the tarmac, our planes pointing nose to nose at each other. I climbed out of the cockpit, feeling his eyes on me the entire time as he did the same, his mustachioed grin taunting me. He had done the impossible, something I didn't think could be done.

He was still laughing.

We returned to the training building and conducted a debrief. There wasn't much to discuss besides the final move of the last fight.

Debriefs with Trim were a little different from the standard. They were loud, funny, often expletive-filled, and full of wisdom. And while it's been nearly twenty years, and I can't recall the actual words he used, I remember the lesson like it was yesterday. I'll paraphrase for everyone's sake, but you'll get the idea:

"You fight a good jet, a really good jet. You're one of the best that's out there right now," he said. "But you were caught off guard today. This is more than just a hit to your ego. We both know I was better than you … *today.* You got complacent, and you know it. You didn't think I could go over the top. You assumed what would happen when you started that last loop, and you expected to win."

Trim had anticipated and made sure it didn't go down the way I'd planned. He'd surprised me, and I didn't have an answer. "You probably thought it couldn't happen," he said, echoing what my brain kept repeating to me.

"But don't chalk it up to me being better than you. Don't let that be your excuse. I didn't do anything you couldn't have done. You just didn't consider all the possibilities, or you would have entered that last turn differently."

He knew me and knew that I wanted to know why. So, he dove deeper.

"When was the last time you looped a slick jet with only thirteen hundred pounds of gas? Or the last time you did a full unload at the top of your loop at twelve hundred pounds of gas to see how much extra speed you could get?" he asked.

My answer to both of his questions was “Never.”

He hadn’t done anything magical, he continued, and he wasn’t just lucky—he just did something I didn’t think you could do. He explained that I’d been content with how I flew my jet over the top, but that there was a catch.

“Instead of max-performing the jet like you had the entire day, you were a little lazy. You just floated over the top of that loop. You could have done more with it. But you were content with what you had because ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the time what you had would have been enough to win,” he finished.

Hearing that I could have pushed the plane further stung at that point in my career. That I could have gotten more juice out of the orange was something I should have known. I didn’t maximize the envelope and could have flown a tighter loop. Leaving capability on the table had cost me. A little more and I would have nullified his move.

“It’s pretty rare given how good we’ve gotten, but that can be the difference. Be unrelenting. Leave nothing to chance. Ever. Coax every inch out of that jet. It could save your life,” he said. “I know that next time you will be prepared for that.”

He closed by bellowing the signature line he used anytime he expected more from someone, “C’mon, MAN!” And that was that.

What else could I do but listen to the master? Of the hundreds of BFM flights in my career, I can recount that last fight with Trim as clearly as the day it happened. I can see him gunning me, and I can hear him laughing. But I can also recall the lesson. My issue wasn’t arrogance, nor was it a lack of skill.

It was complacency.

With each merge, I calculated less and less and started to assume more and more. Each indication was leading me down the path of knowing what was going to happen. Or so I thought. I was the best I was ever going to be, and complacency was still able to crawl inside the cockpit and wreck me.

Trim, if you’re reading this book—and I hope you are—you gave me one of the most memorable debriefs ever. Your perspective that day has proven invaluable for me and remains a poignant lesson for any leader.

Complacency can, indeed, kill.

LESSON: Complacency must be resisted at all times

Everyone knows the phrase. But do they truly understand where complacency dwells? The answer: everywhere there's potential success. Complacency rears its head when you're winning, when things are going your way and you can see the outcome. When you've put in all the work to triumph and all that's in front of you is the finish line. When the goal is within reach—that's when complacency seeps from the ether and poisons your achievement.

If complacency had a first cousin, it would be arrogance. It looks distinctly like a lack of humility. It also serves as yet another reminder of the power of our ego to do harm, but complacency is not the same as arrogance or cockiness. And it does damage well beyond the relationships hurt by those two awful attributes. Complacency is a hundred percent connected to the problems of the ego. However, humility doesn't always solve the perils of complacency. They are two different animals.

Where the ego can invent false narratives to create a sense of well-being and success, complacency undoes all the hard work you invested in an outcome because of a failure to follow through. It combines the confidence that comes with experience and success with the myopia caused by self-satisfaction. To be complacent is to be contented to a fault.

Good leaders see this and do not rest on their laurels merely because the finish line comes into view. Good leaders know that falling short is just that, no matter how close you are to success. If you don't close the deal, finish the build, complete the contract, or get the kill, your mission fails. In my case, if Trim had been a real adversary, an enemy attacker in a wartime scenario, some poor Marine would have had to call my parents with some devastating news.

Yet, don't expect that your folly will be as evident as mine. Complacency doesn't just show up in a monumental and obvious way, with

one clear misstep marking the failure of a task. Some debriefs aren't so cut-and-dried as the one Trim gave me.

Far more common is the cumulative effect of several small missteps that eventually lead to a bad outcome. Dropping the ball doesn't always conveniently happen in a discernible moment. It can happen over an extended period of time. A project starts off well, so a leader becomes lax with status meetings and issues begin to compound. When the first deadlines are met, timeline checks are skipped, slowly putting the team behind schedule. An experienced team with a history of understanding what's expected of them develops gaps because the typical flow of questions and answers stops.

Complacency blinds us to risks we would otherwise detect and creates a culture that spreads that risk throughout the entire team. When we overlook potential dangers and outcomes, when we drop our guard, it has the potential of influencing our subordinates and counterparts. It creates risk for them, too.

Good leaders don't let that happen. They remain constantly present, paying attention to every aspect of their business instead of being content to believe that everything is going to turn out as desired. They squeeze everything out of the situation they can, and they teach the people around them to do the same. They aren't done until the job is done. They are discontented to a fault.

Look for every risk, every scenario that can hurt you and your team. Every pitfall, every weakness, every error. Be attentive to every chance of failure so you don't inadvertently snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Be vigilant and quash the complacency lurking at every turn. Don't be so pleased with your accomplishments that you convince yourself that the work is done, because you just might find yourself caught with an F-18 Hornet on your six, filling you with bullets.

Real-World Application

"Joe's in the hospital." The room went dead silent as someone made the announcement. "The ambulance got him there in record time, but we don't

know what's going on just yet. It's not good."

We were working with an energy company to help them streamline their overhead and run more efficiently. Joe, an electrician who helped conduct repairs on damaged facilities, was electrocuted while shutting down power for a backhoe dig scheduled that evening. When the executive told the room of employees what happened to Joe, I could see shock on the faces in the crowd. Joe was one of them. I had seen that look in people's eyes before, and it's devastating. Members of the military know all too well the feeling of finding out one of your brothers is down. It's awful.

"We will do a full investigation, but it looks like it was a freak accident. I'll send an update as soon as I have one. Right now, we're just praying Joe pulls through," an executive announced at a team-wide meeting. This was serious, and everyone feared the worst for Joe and his family. The potential for a devastating accident in their line of work was omnipresent. And there is nothing worse than feeling helpless, so I could understand their immediate concern. This news came at the end of a full-day workshop we were conducting with dozens of mid-level supervisors, who were forced to leave the day not knowing the prognosis of one of their own.

Thankfully, the start of the next day's training began with some much-needed good news.

"Joe's going to be okay. He definitely got rocked, but thanks to the quick response of the on-site safety team and the local first responders, they got him to the hospital quickly. Doctors say he will make a full recovery and they're sending him home later today. We will give him all the time he needs." The company took the safety and well-being of its workers seriously, and management was still concerned about Joe's health. This was a huge relief to everyone and a good way to start the training we had planned for the day.

When the executives returned that afternoon, they reassured everyone that Joe was back home with his family and already acting like himself. The chuckles in the crowd revealed that Joe was a well-liked, if sarcastic, teammate with a big personality.

I was able to pull aside the senior leader to talk through more of the incident. "Have you had a conversation with the foreman about what

happened?” I asked him after our session.

“I did. He told me that Joe followed protocol and had done everything right. He’d correctly prepped his gear and assessed the site. There’s a checklist our guys follow, and he did it to the letter. Joe’s supervisor checked out the scene last night and found nothing out of order. It seems like it was a freak accident or just some bad luck,” he explained.

Much as I understand that accidents happen, it felt as though the situation wasn’t fully resolved. I continued our conversation.

“That’s good that you debriefed with him,” I said, “and even better that your goal is to keep all of your employees safe. So, what happens now when everyone goes back to the site?”

“What do you mean?” the executive asked.

“What’s the takeaway here, the lesson? What will you do differently next time to make sure it doesn’t happen again?”

“We can check into it more deeply, but from what the foreman said it doesn’t sound like we could have avoided it. I even texted with Joe a bit, and he didn’t have anything more to offer,” he continued, seeming stumped.

“Agreed, sometimes things just happen—accidents, bad luck, coincidence. I get it, but are you and your foreman and Joe sure this was one of those times? Or is there something that could be done differently next time to change the outcome?”

I avoided sounding harsh, but it was clear there was complacency happening on the part of the executive. I had seen enough of that tendency in my own experiences in the cockpit to press him further.

“We haven’t had an accident at this company for over five years. We pride ourselves on our great safety record, but, yeah, there may have been something that was missed.”

The executive wasn’t sure what to expect next but was determined to get to the bottom of it with me. I appreciated his willingness to go deeper into what happened. He suggested we both go talk with Joe, who was recovering well, to see if there was something we could learn. He would bring the foreman and a safety representative to help with things.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” I said on meeting Joe the next day.

“Me too,” Joe said in return. “It was a bit of a scare—nothing like that has ever happened to me before.”

As we all talked, Joe repeated the same things that the executive told me, but with some added information.

“Everything was by the book as far as I was concerned. The only thing I can think of is that we’d had rain a couple of days before,” he said.

“Do you have a specific protocol for the rain?” I asked.

“We do, but I didn’t see the need to follow it,” Joe said. “It had been more than forty-eight hours. I always follow the rain protocol when I’m within that required two-day time frame, but the ground and surrounding areas were bone-dry, so it didn’t seem necessary.”

“Interesting. Sounds like we are confident the rain played no factor in the accident.” I looked for agreement from the group. Instead, I was met with silence, until Joe spoke again.

“Rain’s never been an issue before, and I’ve never had a problem at any other sites with exactly the same scenario,” Joe said, starting to look concerned. “I just assumed that everything would be the same this time around, too.”

“We clearly need to take a good look at this site and figure out what’s going on so this doesn’t happen again,” the executive added. He assured Joe that the project would be shut down and investigated before another accident could happen.

Two weeks later, when I followed up with the executive, he told me their investigation had identified an anomaly at the site. Since there had been far more rain than usual for the region, the groundwater levels had risen higher than normal and saturated some subterranean electrical components. While the ground appeared dry, it was soaked underneath. It’s a miracle Joe wasn’t killed.

“The protocols that worked in the past weren’t relevant because of the new factors, and we missed them. We didn’t do our due diligence when it came to how the excessive rains last winter changed our parameters,” the executive said. “I’m lucky nothing worse happened. Joe feels as though it should have been his responsibility to triple-check the conditions before

proceeding, but this is on me, and I'm going to see that it doesn't happen again."

"That's great," I said. "I'm glad you see how there was some complacency on both of your parts in this situation. You're both taking ownership, and we're on our way to solving the problem. But there's another factor here that I believe needs to be addressed."

The executive seemed confused.

"Not only was Joe put at risk, but what about all the other employees who were in that room when the announcement about the accident was made?"

The executive took a minute to think about my question. "I'm not following what you mean."

"Well, I know everyone was worried about whether Joe would be okay. But the incident was described as a freak accident. Does that do enough to help them stay safe next time they're back on the site?" I pressed.

"No. I should get the team back together and better explain what happened and how we're addressing the situation," he offered. "I'm not afraid to take responsibility instead of just having them still believe it was a freak accident."

"If you're able to do that, you will more than convey your message—you'll also be letting them know that you are a leader on whom they can rely and trust with their lives. And admitting your complacency will help them stay diligent in similar situations in the future," I said.

The next day, I received a phone call from the executive. He had conducted a company-wide meeting and explained everything we had discussed. He said that at the end of the meeting, several employees thanked him for taking the time and being candid. They also mentioned what a good reminder it was to not get complacent; one even admitted he'd had a close call himself over a year ago but had already felt himself being lulled into complacency again.

A good leader stays awake, constantly looking for that one circumstance or change in a situation that could derail an entire operation or, worse, take a life. For good leaders there are no laurels to rest on. Because while you're

resting, complacency will happily creep out of the shadows and kill your win.

4

DETACHMENT IS A SUPERPOWER

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Naval Air Station Pensacola
Water Survival Training
September 1995
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WHICH WAY IS UP?

How much time do I have?

Dammit that hurt.

I can’t see.

My brain was everywhere except where it should have been. Time elapsed as I struggled to unstrap myself. Was I upside down? Water quickly engulfed the cockpit, submerging me. “Relax.” I recalled my training. My air bubbles rose. That was up. “You need to unbuckle. You can do this. Relax.” But time was passing. “Don’t panic. Unclasp the latch. Push the harness off. Don’t get caught up in anything. Just do that. It’s simple. Relax.” I felt my heart race, my lungs started to burn. How long had it been?

Though it had only been seconds, it already seemed like minutes that I had been trapped underwater in what felt like a magic trick gone horribly wrong.

Being upside down feels disorienting on dry land. Underwater it’s wholly unnatural. I tried to get free, but it was taking longer than I’d thought it would. “Relax.” As much as I craved being out of this contraption, nothing was going to change the fact that I was still submerged.

My movements became erratic. Time raced. My heart rate did the same. I flailed around the confined metal box, as spooked as a bird trying to

escape the clutches of something grabbing it. Everything about my movements telegraphed panic.

In theory, all I had to do was tilt my head toward my waist to locate and unhook a simple metal buckle. From there, a few faint wiggles of my shoulder would have released the straps that were keeping me attached. Once loose, I could have gently let momentum carry me just a few feet deeper under the cockpit so I could swim free, kick a little to the side, and glide to the surface with ease.

But rather than following the slow and methodical technique we were shown, I reached up in a panic, grabbed the top of the cockpit railing, pulled way harder than I needed to, and smashed my helmet on the rail. It shifted violently on my head, covering my eyes, and cracked the bridge of my nose, shrouding me in darkness.

I hadn't crash-landed in the water after some catastrophic accident, nor was I in any true peril, as there were safety divers at the ready mere feet from me should things truly go south. I was submerged and strapped to a training cockpit mock-up. This medieval-looking device helped teach pilots how to escape a sinking airplane that had crash-landed into Naval Aviation's native and unforgiving operating environment, the ocean. Thus, I was trapped, or so I felt, inside a legendary apparatus known across all of Naval Aviation as the Dilbert Dunker.

Dilbert is no stranger to Hollywood lore, either. Anyone who has seen the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman* will be familiar with this miniature roller coaster and the havoc it can wreak on its riders. During my ride I was literally imagining the movie characters who in the film had freaked out and trapped themselves so badly they needed rescuing by the submerged safety divers in the pool.

"Please don't let that happen to me."

The Dilbert Dunker had been a staple of the first phase of flight school, then known as Aviation Preflight Indoctrination (API), for decades. API marked the start for all aspiring naval aviators. Located on the Florida Panhandle's fabled Naval Air Station Pensacola, affectionately known as the Cradle of Naval Aviation, it taught the basics of flying and assessed the

initial aptitude of a fledgling candidate's ability to thrive in the chaos of shipboard flight operations.

The majority of API was primarily conducted in a classroom setting. Lectures covering engines, aerodynamics, weather, and basic aviation flight rules and regulations were mandatory training. Courses were fairly rudimentary and passed by all but the least dedicated flight students.

Where API really counted was in the pool. Here, aspiring aviators got their first test of the reality of flying off carriers. This was no place for the idle or uncommitted. The water was no joke. A healthy respect for this part of training was crucial from day one. And first up was Dilbert.

Dilbert existed to simulate ditching a crippled plane at sea and egressing from the cockpit. Back in the era of propeller aircraft, ditching at sea was a legitimate survival option. If an engine quit or crucial fluids like fuel or oil ran dry, getting back aboard the carrier might prove impossible. And since ejection seats hadn't yet become standard, the Navy needed to give their pilots a fighting chance to survive. Those pilots never took ditching at sea lightly. They had to time the sequence of the waves, approach parallel to the swells, and hope for a calm sea state as they tried to gently rest their hapless machine onto a moving target on the ocean's mercurial surface.

If that hurdle was cleared, the pilots knew that as soon as their "landing" was complete, the plane would quickly tumble forward and flip over. Propeller-driven fighter planes carried all their weight up front. On a liquid surface and with no landing gear to support the hefty engines, machine guns, instruments and gauges, and the pilot, physics quickly took over and pulled the nose down and the tail up. Within seconds a pilot could expect to be flipped upside down, with an expedient need to get out before the plane sank with him or her inside. Naturally, this was a lesson better and less expensively taught in a simulator rather than a real aircraft.

So, Dilbert dutifully replicated this rare yet dreaded scenario with a one-person cockpit mock-up that sat atop a long set of rails that looked like a roller-coaster track. It seemed harmless enough. You strap into the cockpit and ride down the rails until it reaches the pool and rolls forward and upside down. Then you unstrap and swim out.

I was first in my group to ride Dilbert. After a brief education on the system, I put on the loaner practice helmet, slid into the seat, buckled the harness, and settled in. “Thumbs-up, heck yeah, I’m ready.” When you’re moving fast enough, the surface of water feels like cement. Therefore, Dilbert inched back to its highest position to maximize impact into the water and give us the best simulation of the feeling.

The giant clank that preceded the release of the chair from the top of the rails gave a jolt that made my stomach go light. The speed that gathered during the ride down exceeded twenty miles per hour. This was going way faster than I anticipated. I winced at the rushing air that buffeted inside my poorly fitting helmet. The impact of the water felt downright violent and launched a wave of water that obscured my view as I lurched forward in the cage upside down, losing my bearings in the process.

My expectation that this would be a fun walk in the park was instantly shattered. I was completely disoriented and immediately began losing control of my emotions. This was nothing like I had anticipated, and I reacted as such. My legs flexed, my grip on the handrail tightened, as did my face, and my shoulders tensed. And while I recalled the simple escape procedures I had been taught, I executed them all wrong. That’s when I smashed my ill-fitting helmet and was submerged into darkness. Hence my current status. My heart racing, my lungs burning, and my brain starting to pound, I could feel, deep in my body, panic’s desire to launch out of my stomach and take control. The worst of all the sensations was that my eyes were watering from the helmet’s cracking my nose. As odd as it seemed for someone underwater, I could feel tears coming from inside my eyes, not the pool itself.

“This can’t be good” was all I kept thinking.

The impact catapulted me back over a decade to when I was eleven and played catcher in Little League. On more than one occasion, a foul tip off the hitter’s bat ricocheted off my helmet, knocking me back. That was where I learned the meaning of the phrase “getting your bell rung.” Because when the ball hit you hard enough, you could actually hear a high-pitched wail going off in your head.

It was the same noise I was hearing now. Only I couldn't just fall back on my butt and call for a time-out. I was ten feet below the water, running out of air and time, and being closely inspected by a merciless evaluator looking for a reason to fail me.

Clearly, a lot had gone very wrong very quickly, but I desperately needed to salvage the situation. That desperation translated into frustration as human nature's worst reactions—emotions like fear, panic, and anxiety—were beginning to run the show. The most important thing I could do was regain control of my emotions and stop my internal downward trajectory.

For a split second I just stopped moving. I raised the helmet off my face and pushed it back onto my head. Then I could look around and regain my bearings. When I tilted my head down, I verified that the harness buckle had in fact been released, and the straps floated freely in the water. Even in my emotional haze I had done something right and nothing held me in place anymore. Tilting my head up again, I saw the bar I had just collided with and calmly grasped it. Then, with a steady tug, I pulled myself downward, clearing the bar easily. I was now directly under the cockpit, deeper in the water, but free from everything.

With a few easy arm pulls through the water, I swam sideways and cleared the entire apparatus. Buoyancy was already giving me a slight assist, as was the safety diver, who'd watched my frantic underwater ballet routine and had moved closer in the event things went truly belly-up. His scuba bubbles gave me free directions as to which way was up. Seconds later I broke the surface of the pool having successfully bested Dilbert.

But I wasn't in the clear. My underwater histrionics had earned the attention of the swim instructor/evaluator. Though he said nothing, his facial expression made it clear he'd have his eye on me at the next training station, which was far more challenging.

With Dilbert's origins in propeller-driven 1940s-era machines, rear-engine fighter jets fitted with ejection seats made him ostensibly obsolete. It wasn't much of a useful test other than assessing a candidate's ability to stay composed. By that metric I had already failed, though technically no one failed the Dilbert Dunker, given its status as an "exposure only" event.

As a result, my fear of failing was totally unfounded and did nothing but compound the stress of the experience and my overreaction to it. It also set me up to struggle the rest of the day if I continued my current trend.

Up next came the monstrous, far more realistic and graded event, the Helicopter Underwater Egress Trainer. Or simply, the helo dunker.

The helo dunker was a giant cylindrical cage that hung in the air above an even bigger pool. Its olive drab oblong shape replicated a helicopter fuselage and behaved as such when dropped from the sky into the pool. Helicopters carry their engines, and most of their weight, at the top and tend to roll over sideways when they land in the water. So, if you find yourself inside one that crash-lands at sea, you can guarantee you'll soon be rolling over, trapped inside it, and needing to escape just like in the Dilbert Dunker. Only you won't be alone. Several of your closest friends will be right there with you, all scrambling to get out as well.

You spend a lot of time doing nothing but trying to stay out of your own head in the helo dunker when you first hit the water. That's because you cannot simply swim out a door or window as soon as you make impact. For that, thank the two giant rotor blades whirling right above your head that would swiftly remove it.

So, the first step in the emergency egress procedures for a flipped-over helicopter is to wait. All motion must stop, lest you meet one of the still-spinning blades on your way out. This means you sit there until the helicopter is completely submerged, upside down, and not rotating before you can try to escape.

For someone even mildly claustrophobic, this can be a nightmare. And while I don't suffer from the phobias or anxieties that many face in the water, after my minor display of panic in Dilbert, I was now doubting myself. The thought that it would happen again popped into my head, and I feared this time I might actually fail the event. My mind was so fixated on the previous helmet-smash scenario that I couldn't think of much else.

My classmates and I sat on a set of metal bleachers looking out at the pool. Staring back at me was this giant green ogre, dripping water like saliva from its grotesque maw, waiting to devour me. I had tunnel vision as

this cage came to life, taunting me to step inside for a final watery tumble before I was invited to pick another career path.

The Navy does their best to make the helo test as realistic as possible. “I know what a handful of you are already thinking,” our instructor said. “You’re gonna be flying jets and this would never happen to you. Well, I have news for you: Even if you get lucky enough to fly jets, which most of you won’t, you’ll still see plenty of time inside a helicopter at sea.” A helicopter is what gets fighter pilots on and off the carrier when we’re not in a multimillion-dollar fighter.

We were instructed to form teams of eight. Each team would do four drops in the dunker. We would rotate seat positions throughout the main cabin and the cockpit so that on each drop we saw a different perspective. We weren’t to sit in the same seat twice on any of the runs. Exit safely on all four, and we’d pass the helo dunker and not have to do it again for another four years.

On the first run, we would exit through the nearest door or window to where we were sitting. Run two, no matter where we were located inside the green belly, everyone would exit through the same main cabin door located in the middle of the helicopter. “If you exit any other door or window, you fail,” the instructor said.

Run three would be just like the first—we would exit through the nearest door or window, only we’d be *blind.* Wearing blacked-out swim goggles would simulate a night crash-landing where we wouldn’t be able to see anything once we were in the water.

“Run four is just like run two. No matter where you are sitting, everyone exits through the same main cabin door again. Only yes, you guessed it, you will all be blind.” I wasn’t a hundred percent sure, but the instructor sounded like he enjoyed that final one a bit more than the others.

The entire collection of students squirmed uneasily in their seats. Already soaked from our dance with Dilbert, we looked around at each other, trying to assess the others’ fear. Most of us laughed nervously, trying to calm ourselves. A few students were sheet-white and deathly quiet. One kid went to the bathroom.

Our instructor then talked us through a few techniques we would need to succeed.

“First, it’s going to feel like forever to get this thing to drop, roll, and stop. You won’t know which way it will roll, but it will eventually pick a side and settle upside down,” he said. That would only take a few seconds. “But it can feel a lot longer because you’re all freaking out,” he added. “When you feel that water rise up toward your head it’s going to get even worse. By the looks on some of your faces, you’re already scared, nervous, frustrated, angry, or all of the above. That won’t help you. So, relax and stay relaxed.” I swallowed hard, thinking back to the morning’s event. That could not happen again.

We were told to identify reference points for ourselves. All throughout the cage are handles, railings, and exit points. They’re called reference points because they don’t move. If we looked around and identified them, it would be easier to find them when we submerged and flipped. If there was a handle above and over your left shoulder when you were upright, it would be above and over your left shoulder when you spun. With that in mind—the fact that the reference points don’t change—we’d each be able to visualize how to get to our exit. It would be crucial to look around and find them, or getting disoriented once the helo dropped was highly likely. “Then you’ll get frustrated. And once you’re emotional, then things get bad,” the instructor said. “Whatever you do, don’t let that happen.”

Finally, and this would be especially true during the blind runs, we’d have to not only remember where our points of reference were but also imagine what everyone else was doing. We wouldn’t be alone in there. And on the last run, with eight people all trying to get out of the same door, chaos could reign. “If you simply barrel through there without considering everyone else—their perspective, and what their obstacles are—you’re gonna ruin it for everyone. Picture what they’re going through—their route of escape, and not just yours—and it will make it easier for all of you. Believe me, if this happens in real life, you won’t be happy if someone on your team doesn’t make it out alive. Especially if it’s your fault.”

The advice, while sobering, sounded straightforward. Stay calm, look around and find a reference point, and picture everyone’s route out the door.

The perception I had of the imposing metal monster changed in an instant. This isn't hard. The only thing in my way was myself.

Run one came quickly after the brief. I sat in the very back of the helo, in the last seat on one side. It had a window directly to my right. To get to my chair and strap in, I had to enter through the main cabin door and walk the length of the helicopter, so I got a view of the entire inside and all its reference points before I settled into my seat.

Clink, whooosh, bam! The helo fell from the sky and smashed into the pool, and we along with it.

After a moment of rocking, it chose left and started its roll. Faster than you would think, water filled up toward my face. But I saw it coming and I timed my final breath to have a full set of lungs before settling underwater. Everything was still, and amazingly the window was still to my right. I remained rational.

Unstrap.

Reach out the window.

Pull myself through.

Float to the surface.

Done.

Easy.

But as I saw the other seven occupants lift to the surface, a few still struggled and gasped. The instructor's advice paid huge dividends for me and made the first run in the helo dunker so much easier than Dilbert. Not everyone was in the same place mentally, though, and it showed.

Run two elevated things dramatically. I sat in the pilot's chair, in the very front left of the helo, facing forward. This time I would have to swim out of the cockpit back to the main cabin behind me, grab several rails hand over hand, and find the main door, as everyone did the same.

Clink, whooosh, bam! Again, to the left.

Timing the last breath was easier this time since I had done it once before. As soon as we settled and unstrapped, I reached for my first handhold over my right shoulder to start moving aft, and noticed that the copilot was already passing me. He was directly to my right and was flailing. He kicked his legs frantically, with his feet missing my head by

inches. I relaxed, waited, and watched. He bypassed another teammate and beelined for the door, making wild arm and leg strokes along the way. At the same time, I saw the candidate sitting in my previous seat at the opposite end of the cabin doing the exact same thing. Darting forward, flailing, frantic, and fast, he groped for the exit.

To me, things were in slow motion as I saw both of them approach each other from opposite sides of the helo, cram their way through the cabin, and collide at the main door.

They were getting out as fast as they could manage, oblivious to their effect on the rest of the occupants. I calmly watched and waited for everyone else to escape before I did. Once number seven was out, I gently glided through the cabin, up and out of the main door, the last man out. Easy. Round two complete.

So far so good, but the two wild occupants on that run had earned some attention.

“Stop kicking in the cabin,” the instructor barked at all eight of us sitting in the bleachers debriefing the event. “Only use your arms. There are too many people crammed in there and you’ll end up kicking someone. There’s more than enough time for everyone to get out calmly. Slow down!”

We all nodded, even the two who were clearly the focus of the instructor’s comments.

Simulated nighttime came with the donning of the goggles. And they delivered their promise. The blacked-out goggles didn’t let in a fragment of light. This was going to be a trial.

Run three sat me in the copilot’s chair, facing forward again, just on the right side of the cockpit this time. Since I was blinded by the goggles, it proved harder to time my final breath as the helo tipped to the right and flung us upside down. But I assumed things would go fine. The nearest exit was directly to my right. With nothing or no one in my way, egress was uneventful. While the pitch black was a bit unnerving, the copilot’s chair was easy to get out of.

Clink, whooosh, bam!

Fourth and final run, back to the left. The dark was the unsettling kind, like when you first turn off all the lights at night and wonder if you'll never see anything but blackness again.

I sat in the main cabin, right behind the pilot's seat, facing in. To find the main exit, I would have to cross to the opposite side of the cabin, move aft about ten feet, and find the main door, which sat roughly in the middle of the dunker. By itself, it would not be a big deal. But in the pitch black, with seven others attempting the same thing, everyone's anxiety was up, including mine.

I took my final breath, and as soon as the dunker settled, I unstrapped the harness. Picturing everyone's routes, I chose to sit tight for a few seconds. I knew the riders on the opposite side had it easiest, sitting closest to the exit, and that they would be out fast. The two others next to me had a similar route to mine. We would float across the cabin using the ceiling as a reference point until we reached the other side. Then we would move inboard toward the door and feel our way out as cooperatively as we could, hoping not to collide with one another. My plan was to wait just a split second longer, with the hope of following them out and avoiding running into them.

The pilot and copilot had it the worst. They had the farthest to travel and had to squeeze through the cockpit opening on the way backward toward the cabin. There was also an unspoken etiquette slowing them down, that they would be the last ones out and shouldn't rush to the exit. This was especially critical in the dark. My plan was to merge in between the last main-cabin occupant on my side and the pilots. I would keep my legs straight to avoid kicking anyone and slowly traverse the top of the dunker, which now was on the bottom side of the pool.

"No big deal, wait just a few seco—"

BAM!

Suddenly, I could see. But I shouldn't have been able to. And my face hurt. Bad.

I instantly knew what had happened. The copilot and his flailing leg had just kicked me square in the face. The blow pushed my helmet back behind my head and knocked my goggles down off my eyes. I could see everything

clearly, and immediately worried I would be disqualified since my night had just become day.

The copilot continued his panicked sprint to the main cabin, then pushed his way out. I also watched the pilot to my left wiggle through the cockpit door toward the back exit. I settled in behind him and slowly swam out. Being able to see made it all pretty easy. I made a halfhearted and futile attempt to bring my goggles back over my eyes. When I surfaced and found the pool deck, my helmet was pushed back off my head while still being held on by the neck strap. My goggles almost covered my mouth.

My face throbbed as a safety observer assisted me up the steps to assess the damage. There was some bleeding, but I knew it wasn't serious when he started laughing at me.

"Do I have to go again?" I asked nervously.

"No. You're good," he said, sensing my anxiety. "In fact, you did a good job. I've been watching you. You handled the last run well. I don't care about your goggles. You stayed calm, followed the reference points, and didn't get in anyone's way. Well, except for your face." He laughed at his own joke.

I was a "qual," as they said, complete with the dunker. The rest of the week's training became what I'd hoped from the beginning: fun. Dropping from towers, inflating rafts, treading water, even being picked up in Pensacola Bay by an actual helicopter to replicate a recovery at sea after an ejection—just like poor Goose in *Top Gun*. Finally, I was fully qualified in the initial Naval Aviation Water Survival Training Program.

Quickly learning the key lessons after my disaster in the Dilbert Dunker got me there. I detached from my emotions, saw the problem from everyone else's perspective rather than my own, and calmly took the steps to solve the problem.

Next stop was the cockpit. But not for everyone. A handful of students from my class were rolled back to the next class to retake the training. The flailing copilot was among them. They all had one thing in common: They couldn't stay in control of their emotions. They couldn't detach.

LESSON: When we can’t detach from our ego, emotions, and point of view, the team suffers

Spend any time with Echelon Front and you’ll hear the saying “Detachment is a superpower.” Nearly everyone struggles to step back and relax, especially in high-pressure situations. But detachment is a *superpower,* because a controlled response is far better than the natural emotional reaction. When you can fully detach, you are able to see things more clearly and holistically. You can see the big picture and even begin to anticipate what is likely to happen next, as if you can see into the future. Making decisions becomes easier, relationships get stronger, and outcomes are better. When detachment becomes your superpower, you are in control. Not only will you win more, but you are able to pass on this ability to others, unlocking the entire team’s success.

When some hear the word “detachment,” they think of someone being distant, aloof, or cut off from others. That’s not the kind of detachment I’m suggesting. The goal is not to walk around in a bubble, immune to interaction or connection with other human beings. I’m talking about detaching from ourselves—our own emotions, ego, and perspective.

By nature, humans are emotional beings. It’s what makes us unique as individuals and allows us to express ourselves to others. It’s important to have and show emotion—to be compassionate to someone in need, empathetic to a friend looking for a shoulder to cry on, or joyful for a family member who’s just accomplished something difficult. People don’t follow robots; they follow other people, other human beings who can genuinely express the appropriate emotion at the appropriate time.

But as leaders, we need to be in control of those emotions.

When emotions take charge, they can often complicate our mental faculties, clouding judgment and getting in the way of sound decision-making. Frustration at an employee for not completing a task on time. Anger at your spouse who forgot something you mentioned was important to you. If actions are taken when these emotions are heightened, you rarely get a good result.

Think of any overly emotional email leveraging the dreaded “Reply all” feature, or a charged conversation between two emotional people. Those are never constructive or helpful, and they don’t lead to good outcomes.

Detaching from one’s emotions allows clear thinking, rational examination of a given situation, and better decision-making. Upside down underwater, if I’d allowed myself to panic, remain fearful, or let my anxiety best me, I might never have passed API.

Staying in control of your emotions allows you to see the world differently, from a rational perspective. By embracing objectivity, you gain control over your emotions, rather than allowing them to dictate your response. Staying dispassionate about a situation allows us freedom from anger, frustration, or tunnel vision.

RED FLAGS

Look for the first indication your emotions are beginning to flare:

-Grinding teeth
-Clenching fists
-Raising voice
-Getting warm, flushed, red-faced
-Withdrawing from a conversation
-Whatever you identify in yourself that marks the first escalation of those emotions

Our ego is just as dangerous as our emotions. We need to be in control of our ego and keep it in check. If you’re convinced your team, child, or idea is better than all the others, you lose sight of potential opportunities and pitfalls.

Nearly everything about detaching from our emotions applies to our ego as well. An out-of-control ego wreaks the same havoc on our relationships and decision-making as our uncontrolled emotions. The link between the two is indelible. We are all ego-driven, emotional beings. But effective leaders can manage and control both.

We also need to be able to detach from our own point of view. It's a natural human tendency to embrace our point of view as reality. It's common to ignore or dismiss the perspective of others. Detaching from our opinion requires empathizing with their experiences, which may be in direct conflict with our own. While some might believe they've got all the answers, good leaders know that is categorically false. That's why they surround themselves with reliable team members who bring their unique skills and diverse perspectives to the table.

Looking at a problem from someone else's viewpoint is crucial to good leadership. Good leaders will put themselves in someone else's shoes to better assess a problem and how to go about solving it. You never know where a good idea will come from, and if you've only got one perspective in your head, you won't be able to see anything else. You'll be blind.

Like being upside down underwater and disoriented in the helo, with any situation there are reference points on which we can all agree. Whether it be the outcome we're looking for, the timing of a project, its budget, or the metrics we're trying to achieve, these benchmarks can guide us to a solution.

Maintain those reference points and the rest is easy. Stay detached from your emotions, ego, and perspective and the way out from underwater, even in the dark, is clear.

Real-World Application

"If I hear about one more discount, I'm gonna lose it." Mary was a sales manager at a commercial flooring firm that we had been consulting with for several months. Sales had recently increased and their business looked solid, but lately some conflicts had developed between the sales team and the rest of the firm. Mary was not happy, and didn't hold back.

We were on the sales floor walking through their department's cubicles. I was getting a little exposure to their world and the good work Mary and her team were doing. She showed off a run-down workspace with outdated technology as if it were a badge of honor. But she was still a bit salty.

“We’ve crammed in more people than this area was ever intended to hold and put up the best sales numbers we’ve ever put up. No new computers and no new cubicles. My team is killing it, and the way they reward us is by undercutting us with more discounts. Can you imagine?”

This was the second time she’d mentioned discounts in a short period of time and in a fairly emotional way, so I asked, “What’s the situation with those discounts you’ve mentioned?”

She was quick to reply, “It’s ridiculous. We have standard pricing for our products. We do give some volume discounts, but those are already accounted for in the price my team quotes. Lately, every deal my team makes seems to be getting reduced in price further, even after the customer is okay with the cost! It doesn’t make any sense that they would do that, and I’m getting tired of it. So is my team.”

I asked her who “they” were.

“Customer success,” she said. “That’s another team that manages our strategic accounts. When we agree to our deals, everything goes to them, and we move on to the next call.”

Mary and her team were clearly getting worked up about how deals were handled once they moved out of the sales team’s hands.

“Any ideas why customer success is discounting deals after you’ve made them?” I was genuinely unsure of why an agreed-upon deal would be lowered after the sale was locked in.

“Don’t look at me. I take a quick look at every deal, sign off my approval in the computer, and then it goes to the customer success lead. He assigns a rep to the client, then they do whatever paperwork they do, and it ends up in the CFO’s hands. Eventually, we all get an electronic document with the final deal. That’s where I see the further price reduction. Sometimes it can take weeks or longer. And my sales team have in their head exactly the commission they’re going to make only to find that it’s now less!” Mary explained, becoming increasingly frustrated.

“Yeah, less money in your team’s pockets when they had a certain expectation can feel like a blow,” I said.

“And those customer success guys are salaried. They don’t work off commission, so what do they care?” Mary was clearly upset, and for

seemingly good reason.

It didn't make sense that contracts were being lowered after clients had agreed to an initial pricing. But having worked with the company even for a short time, I knew they had collective benchmarks, or reference points, so I knew there had to be more to it. No company would lower sales revenue for no reason. However, someone had felt as though they were getting kicked in the face when everyone else was headed safely for the door. There had to be a way to prevent that.

"Do you really believe that they don't care about the sales department?" I asked.

Mary thought about this for a beat before responding. "Of course not. But it just doesn't make sense to me." Her tone had relaxed a bit.

I said nothing, hoping she'd make the connection of what to do next.

"I probably should go ask them what's up," she offered. As I was curious, too, I agreed and asked to join her.

"We're trying to make sure we don't just make one deal but that we retain repeat business," Jason, the customer success lead, explained. "If I offer a company that builds massive warehouse space a discount on shipping, let's say five percent, then it's likely that they'll come back to us for more flooring when they build their next one."

"I understand that part," Mary said. "But my people have been seeing a lot more discounting lately, and it's concerning when it comes to their commission."

"That's because the sales department has been killing it lately. And huge kudos to your folks, because a lot of those initial deals have turned into real strategic accounts for us. With the big picture in mind, sweetening the deal just that little bit more to ensure they keep coming back makes sense," Jason continued. "That benefits everyone in the long run."

Mary could see that point of view, and it gave her a better way to explain the situation to her team.

"I should have come and talked with Jason when I first noticed it happening instead of just getting frustrated," she realized. "And from his point of view it totally makes sense. Even though it's still a bit of a tough pill to swallow, he's right, it's not just about the sales team."

Mary understood, but she didn't seem completely satisfied. And there was something that felt unfinished to me, too. It was time to move up the ladder.

"If your customer success team gets repeat business from their strategic accounts, do the sales reps who originally brought in that client make commissions off those sales?"

"They don't," the CFO of the company replied when we discussed the sales and account structure.

"Do they see its benefit any other ways? For example, do they ever get new equipment or better workspaces?"

The CFO got my point instantly. "We've had plans to put some of that increased revenue back into our infrastructure. Bigger office space, a technology refresh, and we've got plans drawn up for a brand-new kitchen for lunch breaks, but the executive team has been caught up in other things, and I haven't presented that to them yet."

I watched him go through the process of deciding what his next steps must be. Drawing on the lessons from the Echelon Front training we had already completed, the CFO started to see what was happening downstream from him. "They must be feeling a bit in the dark. And it's my responsibility to make sure they know what's going on," he said. "I'll bring the group together and make sure everyone understands how we're putting money back into the company."

The following week the CFO called in both the sales and customer success teams. He explained that the sales team had been successful at bringing in good clients and that the customer success reps were doing their best to hang on to them and bring in more repeat business. While that did undercut the sales team's initial commission, it promoted long-term success.

"However, that long-term success needs to be shared with the team who brought it in the door. So, we're making a slight tweak to the sales commission structure to include a percentage of the repeat business, too."

The CFO also shared the plans to expand the sales team's workspace. By leveraging the power of ownership and detachment, he generated a lot of happy faces in that room. And moving forward, all teams would feel that

they had skin in the game and were working toward a common goal. Their reference points were once again aligned.

Mary approached me after the meeting. “I didn’t expect all that, but I’m glad there’s more understanding on all sides. I also realize that my being upset about the situation didn’t change anything for my team, and it didn’t allow me to think clearly about just coming and talking to someone about what was happening. The hardest part of all this was getting out of my own way. After that it was actually a pretty easy problem to solve.”

“I’ve been there,” I commiserated, “many times.” I commended Mary on how she recognized the impact of stepping back and seeing the bigger picture and how it led to a win for everyone at the company.

The superpower of detachment might not be easy, but it allows us to see more clearly and be open to the perspective of others. Detach from emotion so you don’t end up accidentally kicking someone else in the face.

5

PERFECTION IS A LIE

USS *Constellation*, Pacific Ocean
F/A-18 Hornet Carrier Qualifications
September 9, 1998

"WAVE-OFF, WAVE-OFF," the landing signal officer (LSO) snapped at me in a frustrated voice bordering on disgust. A wave-off is an unsafe landing pass that needs to be discontinued.

His words rattled around in my head as I reflexively accelerated my F-18 in response to the call and started my climb up and past the aircraft carrier, dumbfounded. I hadn't even started the final descent of my very first landing, and the LSO was already sending me away to try it again. "Did that just happen?" I silently asked myself as I wrestled to regain my composure.

Instead of maneuvering my jet down onto the flight deck of the USS *Constellation*, I was now directly above her. The *Connie*, as we called her, was a renowned aircraft carrier dating back to the Vietnam War. Countless aircraft had "trapped" into the four arresting cables strewn across her flight deck for nearly four decades of seaborne operations. She had been home for thousands of naval aviators cycling through combat deployments since her commission in 1961. Currently the *Constellation* was a floating training platform sitting off the coast of Southern California, about seventy miles from San Diego.

All the pilots currently flocking toward the *Connie* were attempting to complete what would be our final phase of F-18 training, Carrier

Qualifications. CQ for short, it came at the end of a yearlong program that introduced aspiring fighter pilots to every mission set the highly versatile Hornet could expect to employ in war. Much like an actual mission, CQ was the culminating and often most challenging phase of what a jet pilot does to land safely back aboard ship. As part of the newest class of fighter pilot trainees hoping to qualify on her fabled flight deck, I would add to her legacy, if I could get aboard.

My wave-off marked a terrible start, and it was clear by the tone of my LSO's voice that he wasn't pleased. LSOs were handpicked pilots, typically high performers when it came to carrier operations, who help guide the planes onto the ship. With extensive training under their belt, they were expected to know exactly when and what to say to pilots who were on the cusp of making egregious and potentially deadly errors in their landing attempts. The LSOs' coveted position bore a huge responsibility for ensuring the safe recovery of the multimillion-dollar aircraft assigned to the ship. Normally, they would have nothing to say, at least with an experienced group of pilots who skillfully and predictably came aboard. But today they were supporting a bunch of nervous and unreliable rookies who had already justified the Navy's investment in LSOs.

After weeks of the LSOs training us on Field Carrier Landing Practice (FCLP)—landing our fighters on a full-size runway that only simulated a carrier deck—it was time for the real deal. While this was not my first CQ, it was my first in the Hornet and it went without saying that the stakes were high. CQ grades would directly affect what squadron I was assigned to when I completed training and joined the fleet in a few short weeks. I desperately wanted to be in VMFA-314, the legendary fixed wing Marine fighter attack squadron also known as the Black Knights. Theirs was one of only four Marine F-18 squadrons assigned to support the Navy's flying off carriers. The Black Knights had famously strafed the skies in the F4U Corsair over Japan in the Battle of Okinawa. In Vietnam, they flew more than twenty-five thousand combat hours in F-4 Phantoms out of Chu Lai and Da Nang Air Bases, earning them the Hanson Trophy as the best fighter attack squadron in the Marine Corps. After transitioning to the F/A-18

Hornet, the Black Knights headed to the Middle East, where they dropped more ordnance than any other squadron in Operation Desert Storm.

In addition to the celebrated reputation they enjoyed within the Corps, they had also just been immortalized by Will Smith, who saved the world from aliens while flying with the Black Knights out of Marine Corps Air Station El Toro in the 1996 movie *Independence Day*. I wanted to be on the front lines of whatever threat America faced next, extraterrestrial or otherwise. But the Black Knights were open only to pilots with exceptional reputations, especially when it came to landing on the carrier.

If you're making a list of the most difficult things in all of aviation, put landing a jet on a boat at the top. Trying to explain it doesn't do its difficulty justice. No metaphor can effectively convey such a nerve-racking and demanding feat that is intolerant of even the smallest error. This proves especially true in adverse conditions, when you have a mechanical problem, and most certainly while landing in darkness. And rest assured, I would not pass CQ until the sun set on the *Connie* and I successfully completed my first series of night traps.

For now, though, the sun continued to shine, at least outside of my cockpit. And I was nestled into my jet still looking to make good on my flight from home base to the carrier.

I was nearly euphoric as I embarked on a historic event that I fully expected would culminate in the most satisfying accomplishment of my flying career, carrier-qualifying in the F-18. El Toro wasn't just a movie set. The now-abandoned air base in Orange County, California, sat about forty miles south of Los Angeles. It was also barely a mile from where I spent my entire childhood.

At the time, in the late '90s, the air station was still active, but its demise was imminent. Of the half dozen jets that departed the base for the carrier that morning, none of them would be returning. After their weeklong stint aboard the *Connie* certifying the last class of students ever to train at El Toro, the jets would end up sixty miles south at the now-famous Miramar air base, former home of TOPGUN, and future home for all the Marines packing up and leaving El Toro for good. I was the very last student F-18 pilot to launch that final day, ending its fifty-six-year history as the

Marines' West Coast master jet base. Given how much time I'd spent at every El Toro air show as a boy, and how its proximity inspired my desire to not just fly jets but to be a Marine, the significance of the moment was not lost on me.

But instead of basking in the glory of that full-circle life event that took me from my childhood to the *Connie*, I now felt like I was just slapped awake from a daydream. I was facing a reality that looked nothing like the fantasy I had concocted for myself where Will Smith and I swapped stories of saving the world while sporting Black Knight patches on our flight suits.

Blasting out of El Toro under the gaze of local newspaper photographers and navigating to the *Connie* was uneventful. Within minutes I had arrived overhead of the ship and set up for my first landing. I maneuvered to what was called the downwind leg, where the pilot gets the jet established and ready to complete the final turn back toward the ship to land into the wind. All the landing checks were done on the downwind leg. Landing gear, flaps, tail hook, lights, airspeed, altitude, angle of attack, and heading were all configured just so, to set up the final 180-degree descending approach turn. This brought the landing area into view so a pilot could drop into the arresting wires. These four lifelines were the only restraints against thirty-five thousand pounds of machine hurtling onto the ship at over 150 miles per hour. Manage that six times today, and I would be ready for the night, then on to starting my career as a legitimate carrier pilot in an actual combat fighter squadron.

But there were concerns. The landing area, or LA, on a carrier measures less than eighty-five feet wide. For baseball fans, that's less than the distance from home to first. The LA stretches the length of a football field, three hundred feet long. It shouldn't even qualify as a runway. If not for those four arresting cables, the tiny dimensions of a carrier would serve no purpose at all for a plane. Real estate on a floating airfield comes at a premium. Any space not designated for landing gets quickly occupied by planes or heavy equipment. Wingtip to wingtip, the Hornet spans forty feet and has about twenty feet of slop in either direction. Therefore, if you are off your lineup by even a few feet, you can easily hit something—something big. So, lineup matters.

But a pilot's stress is really amplified compliments of the altitude problem. On a regular runway, if you get a little low during your approach, you can land on something called the underrun. The underrun is a stretch of concrete before the actual runway that is roughly a thousand feet long. While not as sturdy or smooth, it gives a nice little buffer for poor airmanship or challenging conditions. It is certainly to be avoided, but there are worse things than landing on it. Done smoothly, you might not even notice it happened.

An aircraft carrier has no underrun. You get the solid-steel flight deck, sitting sixty feet above the water, and nothing more. The ramp is not the ship's cantina. It's the edge of the flight deck, with a curved part at the very back of the ship that you have to clear to safely land in the cables that stop you. An F-18 on the correct glideslope—the proper path of descent for an aircraft attempting to land—will clear the ramp by thirteen feet. That's it. The height of a basketball backboard is how much room you're given. You have only thirteen feet of buffer while sitting in a fifty-six-foot-long jet, when everything is perfect.

Even in the best conditions, your margin for error feels like the width of a razor blade, and it doesn't provide much reassurance knowing that if you're off by much more than that, your speeding jet will collide with the carrier. No underrun, no do-over, no mulligan. Just a massive collision, called a ramp strike, where your jet will likely break apart and burst into flames, ending your career as a pilot and, more to the point, very likely ending your life.

Countless ramp strike videos, now freely available for everyone to see on YouTube, were shown as part of our preparation for CQ. The images are graphic, stomach-turning, and burned into the mind of every naval aviator. The deadly explosions and harrowing screams of "POWER" by the LSOs futilely begging the pilots to make last-second power additions, hoping to change their fate, reinforced the most important lesson when coming aboard the ship—*Don't be low.*

With those images and voices burned deep into my soul, I arrived to the downwind for the first time at the *Connie*. I turned my attention to my

approach and started my checklist, only to be disrupted by those very same calls I had previously come to know only from film.

“POWER, POWER!” blared into my headset. I shot a glance to my left and caught the view of one of my classmates’ F-18s rolling off the far edge of the flight deck. He had just “boltered” on his first attempt, as he had been too high and missed the wires completely. Bolters were common among new pilots looking to avoid ramp strikes and death. But he’d overcompensated and found himself egregiously high. In a last-ditch effort, he greatly reduced his power, hoping to snag the last wire. He didn’t. Instead, his now underpowered jet rolled off of the flight deck, triggering the LSO’s emphatic screams.

Instead of managing my own checklist, I held my breath and craned my neck to keep sight of my classmate’s F-18 as it dropped below the carrier, its wings waffling as it struggled to gain altitude. For a moment, I thought he might hit the water. It sounded like the LSOs thought so, too.

Fortunately, my last view was of the Hornet as it climbed away from the ship. Unfortunately, I had missed the timing of my approach turn to the carrier. Like a driver who almost rear-ends the car in front of them while staring at another car trying to avoid their own crash, I was now frantic. It was a terrible place to be for my first trap in the Hornet. In a frenzy, I dropped the nose three degrees, threw in a thirty-degree angle of bank left turn, and added power to assist through the descending turn back toward the ship.

Those were technically all the right inputs, had I turned on time. But because I was late initiating my approach, all my planned numbers were off. I found myself making arbitrary adjustments, hoping to arrive at the right starting position for my final descent. In theory, a perfectly timed and flown turn would put me exactly three hundred feet above the water, three-quarters of a mile behind the ship, giving myself roughly eighteen seconds of flight time to manage an ideal descent into the third arresting cable, my target for landing.

Now I was just guessing.

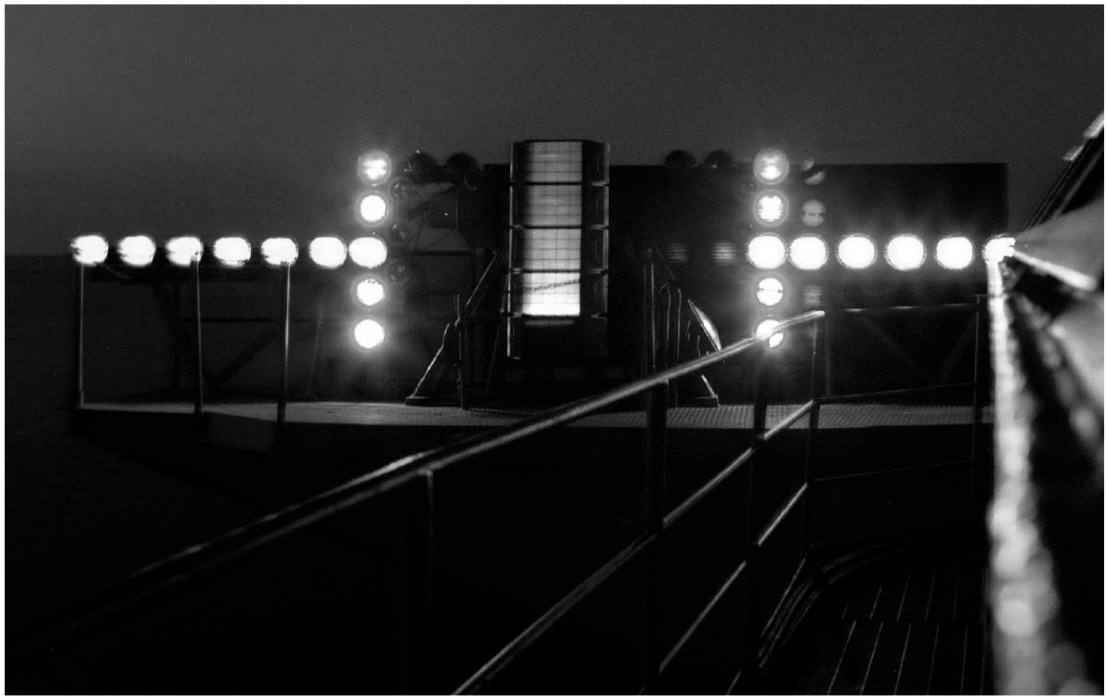
Undoubtedly the LSO’s eyes were locked onto me as I groped the air, looking to reestablish the right path to the ship. Midway through my turn I

practically leveled off in a wild attempt to reach the proper altitude once I rolled out of my turn behind the ship. As I drove closer and closer to the boat, it became clear I was way too high, and I pulled power to drop down into the glide path. That's when I was greeted with the wave-off call from the LSO.

It was my unceremonious invitation to give up my wildly dangerous first approach and try it again. I had no choice but to clear my head and fly another downwind. Thankfully I had no distractions other than the memory of my classmate's near calamity and my abysmal first effort. I started the next approach turn on time and initiated the same maneuvers, only now under the proper conditions. Halfway through the turn, I had descended through 450 feet and, as the *Connie* came into view and I was completing the 180-degree turn, my final altitude check of 300 feet showed me right on glideslope.

It was time to transition off the jet's instruments and to the visual indicators on the ship itself. The best verification of my exact altitude would now come from the Fresnel Lens Optical Landing System, more casually known as "the meatball" or "the ball." The ball, made famous by Maverick and his silky-smooth "Maverick has a ball" radio call in the original *Top Gun*, is a series of reflective lights that constantly depict the plane's position on the glideslope. Bounded on each side by a row of stationary green lights called datums, a reflective mirror in the center of the Fresnel lens illuminates a yellow circle, which looks slightly like a meatball. It's a stretch, but the reference is unmistakable once you see it. When the big yellow meatball is above the green datums, you're high. When it's below the datums, you're low. In the center of the datums, you're on glideslope.

The Meatball



The Fresnel Lens Optical Landing System (FLOLS) uses mirrors to reflect light at the pilot to assess the aircraft's position on the glideslope. The square mirrors in the center blossom at night, producing the shape of a round ball, known as "the meatball." *Public domain photo*

Pilots are taught to fly the ball instead of internal instruments, which have enough lag to become unreliable in the final few seconds of a carrier landing. The ball gives immediate and accurate information all the way to touchdown and is the only useful reference for a pilot trying to nail a landing.

I was where I needed to be this time, and ready to make a better show of things. "233 Hornet Ball, 4.4, Berke," I squawked into my radio. I was in aircraft 233, an F-18 Hornet, I had visual of the ball, and I carried 4,400 pounds of fuel. I added my last name on the first pass, so the LSOs knew for sure who was in which jet.

"Roger Ball," replied the LSO, acknowledging my telling him that I saw the ball and was coming in. I was "on and on," meaning I was on a good lineup and altitude. It was a perfect start, with eighteen seconds to go. Now I just had to keep it centered all the way to touchdown, as a mental cadence, like an announcer calling a horse race, began in my head.

Eighteen seconds, on glideslope. In a blink, I was high. Sixteen seconds left, power off just a bit to bring the ball back down. My left hand furiously toggled both throttles. “Walking the throttles” isn’t something one does unless near the ship or in close formation in order to make microscopic adjustments to the plane’s altitude and speed one engine at a time. It takes some time to master the tiny, rapid forward and aft movements in response to what I was seeing on the ball, and at this point in my career, I was by no means an expert.

Fourteen seconds left, down the ball came—“Too much!” Twelve seconds, power back on with a punch forward on the throttles. No way I was going low; back up it came; “Too much again!” Ten seconds. Stop it from rising by pulling power, just a little. Eight seconds, here comes the ramp; the ball showed I was still high, but it was dropping. “Don’t let it go low”; more power. Six seconds. “Crap, too much power”; I was floating. Three seconds, no way this can be salvaged. The ball was shooting off the top of the lens, barely visible, then …

Bam!

My plane forcefully rebounded off the flight deck and right back into the air. “Boooolter, Booolter, Bolter,” the LSO said in a not-so-subtly mocking voice, extending the o sound and laying on the snark nice and thick. This was all in an effort to tell me what was already so completely obvious. Although a bolter is a safe pass, my jet didn’t come to a stop. I missed the wires and had to come around, yet again.

“Oh. My. God. Not again.”

My mind went berserk and my eyes wanted to pop out of my head with disbelief. Just like that I was 0 for 2, having thrown two appalling passes right out of the gate. A wave-off and a bolter—this was horrible. My landing grades were already flirting with failure, and I hadn’t even completed a single trap. Forget the Black Knights—I’d be lucky to qualify. I’d spent three years learning to fly jets, dreaming of becoming a single-seat carrier pilot, I was in the final flights of the very last phase of training, and I now was going to fail? What the…?

On the downwind, emotion tried to overtake me. I was, at the same time, angry, embarrassed, frustrated, and full of doubt. If I didn’t pull it

together, immediately, I'd seal my fate. I calculated I needed six perfect passes to get me out of this hole. And I mean perfect—another bolter or wave-off would spell doom. Much like I needed to stop overreacting to my current emotions, I also had to stop overreacting to the movement of the ball. I had to be smoother on throttles, more subtle. The more erratic I was, the more the LSO would see I wasn't cut out for carrier life. The ship was no place for frayed nerves, unpredictable reactions, or subpar flying. It was a place for perfection, and I was going to show I could deliver it, starting right now.

I relaxed, and once again my downwind checks were complete. I was abeam the LSO platform. Time to start my turn. I reminded myself that even the most novice of pilots can nail the approach turn. Just set in the parameters and verify the checkpoints; 450 feet at 90 degrees through the turn. Then 300 feet at 180 degrees of turn. Roll out, pick up the ball, make the call, "233, Hornet Ball, 3.9." "Rooooger Ball," the LSO smoothly replied.

My cadence started again. A perfect start with eighteen seconds to go, on and on. The ball sagged ever so slightly. "Don't overreact, it's barely low." A little shot of power with a nearly imperceptible walk forward on the throttles. Fourteen seconds left, it's moving back to the center. Good. At twelve seconds, almost on. Then ten seconds, another drop, but tiny. Eight seconds, here comes the ramp again—I was stable. "Don't let it sag too much. Six seconds, just a quick squirt of power, try to push it back up. Hold it." Three seconds, tiny drop again, but I was getting aboard. I was clear of the ramp, lineup was good, the ball might have dropped a touch, but not enough to really notice … BAM! Tuuuuug.

As the hook snagged the second wire, I was violently pitched forward in my seat. I immediately selected full power in case I didn't stop, a requirement on every touchdown. But it became abundantly clear by the yanking shoulder straps and my face being thrown toward the instrument panel that I wasn't going anywhere. Even at 150 miles an hour, thirty-six thousand pounds at full thrust from both engines proved no match for the *Connie*'s inch-thick steel-braided arresting cable that wrenched me to a stop in three seconds.

What a rush. This was everything I'd worked for and wanted. Finally, a real trap in a Hornet. I loved it.

Being low on gas, I was taxied aside to fill up before my first catapult launch. I still needed five more perfect traps to salvage my floundering landing GPA and finish the day requirements before nightfall. If I could replicate that last pass, the math was in my favor. My confidence was building.

Getting fuel gave me a chance to decompress and reflect. Those first two passes were ancient history. "Let it go," I told myself. Plus, the most recent pass was good. I was slightly low a few times, but the LSOs had nothing to say for a change, and I got aboard. I had also proved to myself I could fly the type of pass that was needed. No more errors, no more flailing. I was going to be razor-sharp, perfectly on the glideslope, and on my way to full redemption for the first two outliers.

The steam-operated catapult on an aircraft carrier makes over forty thousand pounds of jet feel like a marble being launched from a slingshot. From a dead stop to over 160 miles per hour in less than three hundred feet takes three seconds. It excites every sense, from the various reactions to the high-pitched mechanical grinding sound that grows louder and louder as the jet picks up speed to the churn in your stomach and the blur in your vision as you hurtle down the deck. All culminating in a massive WHAM, then things go momentarily silent as your brain catches up to a jet now airborne under its own propulsion, no longer needing assistance from the ship.

But there was no time to savor the rush. So, I put my euphoria aside and focused on my turn to the downwind and the next landing.

In a blink, I went through almost an exact repeat of the previous pass, and the rest of the morning quickly concluded. Three more landings, another fill-up with gas, and three more landings gave me seven total traps for the day, one more than I needed before the ship closed out daytime operations and reconfigured for night launches. The extra pass was unplanned, but given that my LSO hadn't made a peep since my bolter, I doubted he saw anything of concern.

Still in my flight gear, I awaited the gaggle of LSOs meandering about the ship, looking for the students who'd just completed the day portion of

CQ. As is standard operating procedure, every landing gets evaluated, notated, and graded by the LSOs. Then, without fail, each pilot hears about it. Even if it comes days later, every individual pass eventually gets debriefed. I'm anxious for the night launch, and hopeful my final performance would negate the first two passes. Or at the very least, that they weren't much of a setback.

Four or five LSOs would typically be present, with the controlling LSO recounting to me in the standard Navy shorthand every detail of what he saw on each of my passes. It was always professional, direct, and helpful.

Only this time, that didn't happen. As I was removing my flight gear in a nearby locker room, I was met by the lone senior LSO. "Chip, that was not the performance I expected from you," he said without so much as a greeting, handshake, or customary "Welcome aboard" that acknowledges a career milestone.

His stare and deadpan demeanor destroyed whatever optimism I had held on to. My throat tightened as I followed him to the ready room, a gathering place for pilots waiting to brief and launch for the impending mission. My mind raced through all the career implications of that first horrendous pass and the damage it was about to do. He found a quiet corner and suggested I take a seat.

"What did you see out there today?"

I acknowledged that I'd started a little rough with the first two passes, but said that after that I felt a little better. He stopped me before I could finish, seeing my expression and watching me flounder for an appropriate reply.

"I don't even care about the first two passes," he said, which confused me. He went on to explain that the wave-off that came after my classmate almost put his plane into the drink didn't even count.

"We were all rattled," he said. "That pass was a throwaway, and the bolter was fine. It's the rest of your day I can't figure out."

I was trying to keep my composure and listen to what he was saying but somehow already knowing what he probably meant.

"What did you see the rest of the day with the next seven passes? Because to me, they were basically all carbon copies. And none of them

were good."

I exhaled and fought back the burning desire to feign ignorance. "I was a little low," I begrudgingly admitted.

"YOU WERE LOW!" he agreed, emphatically. "What I can't figure out is why? Why would you keep the ball LOW all day? As soon as you see that ball drop below the datums, what does it tell you?" he asked.

"You're low," I uttered, feeling like a kid having been sent to the principal's office.

"Yeah, obviously," he agreed angrily. "But there's more to it. If you're low, *one inch low,* you're underpowered, you're trending in the wrong direction, and it's going to get worse. It also means what you did to put yourself there wasn't right. Your inputs, power corrections, and assessment were all off. Even the approach turn was off. So why would you wait to acknowledge that?"

"I don't know," I weakly offered.

"YES, you do," he almost cut me off. "You didn't want to overcorrect and push the low to a high because you thought it would look bad if you had another bolter. So, you ignored it."

There it was. And I knew it. I had tried to salvage the morning by preventing another bolter. I had so desperately wanted to get aboard that I continually avoided making the needed corrections, and instead responded like I was good. I wasn't, and he knew it.

But my LSO explained that doing nothing about being low is way worse than a bolter.

"Bolters will happen—it's no big deal, especially at this point in your career. But if you get in the habit of dragging in that low, pretending it's okay, not making constant adjustments one way and then the other, one day you'll meet the ramp."

And then he delivered the kicker.

"And did you think I wouldn't see that you were low?"

He stopped talking, letting that sink in. Why did I think I could hide that from him? Who did I think I was fooling?

After he knew his point had landed, he continued.

“Chip, there’s no perfect pass. After hundreds of practice passes at the field, you know that. You’ve been to the ship before, *you know that*! You are making adjustments and corrections to your errors all the time. In fact, the sooner you accept your deviations, the faster you’ll fix them and the better you will get. I’m not looking for perfect, I’m just looking for corrections. The worst thing you can do is hide from making them, especially at the ship.”

I absorbed every word. Everything he said was right. And I already knew it.

My ego was so strong that I argued and disagreed with an inanimate object. There was no judgment from the ball telling me where I was; it was merely trying to get me safely aboard a ship. And yet, I still listened to that voice inside my head telling me I had to be perfect. I was refusing objective, lifesaving input, and it nearly cost me my dream.

It marked the lowest point of my training. I’d never really struggled in flight school or in F-18 training, been at the top of my class, and here I was at the penultimate task coming in with a pathetic performance.

“You’re not flying tonight.”

I already knew that before he said it, but it gutted me all the same.

“We both know you’re a good student. I’ve flown with you for almost a year and I know you’re going to have a great career. Your reputation is solid, and I’m on your side. But today sucked,” he said.

“Now, one of the jets is down for maintenance, which means you’re lucky because you weren’t going anyway. I can bench you without it being a big deal, so consider this a gift. Take the next twenty-four hours to think about all this. You’ll get another chance tomorrow. One jet, one tank of gas, one opportunity to show me how you fly the way I know you can. One chance to show me that I can *trust* you, by yourself in that jet, to make the right corrections coming aboard.”

Then he walked out. For the first and only time in my career, the LSO didn’t debrief my passes or give me my grades.

The next day, I strapped into my Hornet to launch again from the *Connie*’s flight deck. I got through four traps before I ran out of gas. None of them were perfect.

The same LSO met me in almost the exact same spot as he had the day before. Only this time, he brought with him the rest of his team, and a beaming smile on his face as he thrust out his open hand for a shake.

"Welcome to the boat!" he bellowed. Finally.

LESSON: Perfection doesn't exist, so don't demand it

If you demand perfection, you will always be unsatisfied with the outcome. Human beings are not perfect and never will be. Flawless execution doesn't exist, and no one can achieve an error-free performance. Everyone makes mistakes all the time. But a good leader learns to embrace them.

If you indicate to your team that you accept only perfection, you will fail them. Everyone should absolutely *strive* to improve. The pursuit of perfection can be productive and helpful, provided we accept one thing—it is an elusive goal that will never be reached. Don't be mistaken: If you ask your people to be perfect, they will try to live up to your impossible demands. But when they realize they cannot live up to those lofty expectations, they will lose confidence and start to conceal little things, ignore tiny errors, and overlook small deviations, hoping to make you think they have executed flawlessly, as directed. Eventually, these shortcomings will add up, leading to disaster. Neglecting these mistakes means they will accumulate over time and culminate in catastrophe.

An ideal team fixes their imperfections, no matter how minuscule, and shares them with one another to spread their lesson. Rather than hiding or ignoring their mistakes, they proudly recognize and bring awareness to them, and to the effort made to fix them. The admission may be a blow to our egos, one that we resist implicitly. But by creating a culture in which acknowledging and correcting mistakes is both encouraged and expected, we can overcome our tendencies by setting a new standard for how we treat errors.

Naval Aviation recognizes that perfection is a myth. There is no such thing as a perfect landing, especially in the most demanding and unforgiving environment. I don't recall the word "perfect" ever being used

to describe anything, not a goal or an outcome. It just didn't exist in our lexicon. In my over twenty years of flying, there were times I did expect it from myself, and these personal demands only led me further away from my goals. But no one ever ordered it from me.

When I became an LSO, I carried on with that tradition. I witnessed thousands of carrier landings in virtually every conceivable condition myself. I waved airplanes aboard during the bluest sky and glassy calm days, where it felt as if the perfect flying conditions might have been contrived by the heavens like a gift to our carrier. I also guided pilots when it seemed Poseidon himself was toying with us, producing storms that tossed our ship like a cork bobbing in a washing machine, making visibility so limited you couldn't see the nose of the jet from the cockpit. But in all my experience, neither scenario has ever produced a perfect landing.

In ninety-nine percent of all the landings I witnessed, I never said a word to advise these pilots. On a few occasions as an experienced LSO and team leader, I may have said something to help save someone's life. But I spent most of my career on the platform, waiting for the moment to make a call that I never had to make. Not because any of the pilots I was grading flew a perfect pass but because they were making constant corrections to the errors that we both saw. Their willingness to accept and correct those deviations proved they didn't need my call. Admitting those errors prevented a mishap or the need for my intervention. They weren't blind to their mistakes, nor did they think they were perfect. It was eighteen seconds of making constant minute modifications, all the way to touchdown.

The Navy employs the most humbling yet authentic grading system imaginable. Every pass is graded, with the best being an "OK."

LANDING GRADES

OK: a pass with only minor deviations
Fair: a pass with some safe deviations and appropriate corrections
Bolter: a safe pass where the jet doesn't come to a stop

No-grade: a pass with larger deviations, poor corrections, or no response to LSO calls
Wave-off: an unsafe pass that needs to be discontinued
Cut Pass: an unsafe pass with unacceptable deviations

Technically, there is an elusive pass called OK Underlined. It's a pass with no LSO comments and is considered the ideal. But it's awarded only for two reasons. The first is when you get aboard during circumstances so adverse, like a snowstorm or engine failure, that you were lucky to make it down. The second is on the final pass of your tour, and the LSOs want to give you a little going-away present. In any case, it's not awarded for perfection; it's more of a celebration of your final departure or your miraculous survival. I never gave one as the controlling LSO, nor did I ever receive one as a pilot, not even on my final pass.

After decades of carrier operations, the Navy has recognized a revealing fact: The best you'll ever do is OK. And if the best pilots in the world, flying in the most unforgiving conditions in the world, embrace that, they will always strive to improve. They won't settle—literally or figuratively—at the ship. They will never accept they have achieved the elusive perfection so many think they are chasing. The Navy knows it's not out there. A good leader knows that, too. If even on an aircraft carrier, the most challenging of environments with the smallest margin of error, where mistakes become a matter of life or death, perfection cannot and will never be achieved. Naval Aviation's success comes not from expecting perfection but from the understanding that demands for it actually increase the likelihood of failure. That's why every landing is critiqued and debriefed—it serves as a reminder that we can always improve.

At Echelon Front, we use a powerful tool we call the "debrief" to understand these necessary improvements. Whether you are a pilot landing on a carrier or a team completing a project, we can all evaluate what went wrong and what can be done better in the future. By publicly sharing and owning up to our mistakes, we accept the lessons we can learn from them. Not only do you comprehend what actions you need to take next time, but your team knows how to assist you. Debriefs that are honest, candid,

require humility, and reveal even the smallest of mistakes serve to help everyone improve—and move closer to perfection.

When you don't insist on perfection, you afford your team space to grow. When people have space to grow, they're more likely to take pride in their improvement, encouraging them to push themselves harder. Gaining providence in the workplace through improvements empowers your team members. Remember how it felt learning how to ride a bike? Not being able to steady the handlebars and falling down might not have been fun, but making corrections, sticking with it, improving your balance, figuring out where to put your weight when you started pedaling—how satisfying did that feel when you finally figured it out? Then you were ready to learn how to jump off curbs.

The same goes for any endeavor we pursue as adults, from creating architectural plans to achieving a sales goal. If you allow your team to make improvements on their mistakes, they will be even more inclined to ask for help when they need it. That makes them more likely to adjust their pitch to hit a sales number or to figure out the solution to a build. Their success breeds a personal desire for even more. It's not only in the best interests of your business, but it makes the team feel great, too, when they achieve better results for themselves.

It's liberating to embrace our imperfections rather than chase a myth. Applying this mentality to everything we do gives us a far better chance to fix what's wrong, because we are willing to recognize flaws and defects. And when we create the same belief with our team, everyone gets better. It's how unstoppable teams, like carrier strike groups, Navy SEALs, and TOPGUN, are formed. Perfection simply doesn't exist, at least not in the traditional way we think of it—where everything is done exactly right. So, good leaders don't demand it—they redefine it.

Real perfection is the constant correction of errors so small that they're almost imperceptible. Just like when landing on a carrier, we must accept the inevitability of our mistakes, without being content that we've made them. If we ever think we've achieved the traditional definition of perfection, we will stop making corrections. And that's when we sow the

seeds of failure. Instead, we must use our mistakes as jet fuel to propel our teams forward.

Real-World Application

“These small mistakes are killing us! It has to stop,” Mitchell said. “Every time it’s something else. I can’t believe this keeps happening.”

Mitchell was the COO of a small but growing company that retrofitted and customized boats. They had started by producing “remove and replace” interiors for original equipment manufacturer (OEM) cabin and galley setups in smaller personal boats. In the past several years they’d expanded to fully customizable interiors sought by some of the largest boat owners in the world.

Mitchell was a passionate boss and a big fan of Jocko, Leif, and Echelon Front. He shared that passion with his team in the form of regular sermons that always had an underdog story.

Mitchell would recount missions from small special forces teams that took on much larger adversaries and won. The Battle of Ramadi, which of course I knew intimately, counted among his go-tos. Or he’d wax poetic about how the Boston Red Sox, down three games to none, came back to win the ALCS against the powerhouse Yankees in 2004.

To Mitchell, these were examples of perfection winning over the imperfect and a model for how he ran his small company. However, his theory of perfection didn’t fit with any of those examples. Not to take away from any of those outstanding accomplishments, but the idea of perfection doesn’t account for all the errors and guys left on base that led to Boston’s losses in the first three games during that series. Nor does it acknowledge the numerous American soldiers, sailors, and Marines who valiantly lost their lives fighting for freedom in Ramadi. When examined more closely, even these noble accomplishments are not models of perfection.

Regardless, Mitchell’s passion had turned to exasperation with the latest series of setbacks that put several high-paying deliveries weeks behind schedule. Demanding customers would not be happy.

We had worked with the company before, and I knew it was a good team. Relationships were strong. But undeniable tension had started to build as the team had grown dramatically in the previous year, and Mitchell had reached out asking us to come back and spend some time with them.

“Every time we start a new job, we run into some issue,” he explained to me when we first reconnected. “Look at this.” He showed me an installation that was not yet complete. “The inlay for the mounting bracket didn’t get cut wide enough to install because of some damage incurred during demo. It wasn’t noticed until the very end of the fitment, and several pieces need to be reordered to cover a wider hole. That takes days for what, at best, should have been noticed when it happened and, at worst, could have been a thirty-second fix before trim got ordered. I mean these are little things!”

His impatience and lack of tolerance for the issues came across in his elevated tone.

“And it seems to be getting worse,” he continued, his frustration growing. “Then I don’t find out about these things until much later in the build, sometimes days before it’s supposed to ship. I mean, do they think they’re going to be able to hide this from me?”

I’d heard that before.

I observed a morning stand-up meeting where he ran through the status of several custom builds, and it was rough.

“These mistakes are unacceptable,” he said, chastising his employees. “This is not okay. At this point, we should not be making these mistakes.” He continued before delivering the final blow. “We need to be perfect—that’s how we win.”

There it was.

I saw the faces in the crowd, their darting eyes and furrowed brows. I saw the knee-jerk negative reactions of the nearly two dozen employees who worked for Mitchell. This was not a group of people as fired up as he was about how to solve issues.

We got together after the stand-up to talk about things.

“You mentioned a few times this morning about being perfect,” I said. “How does that work?”

“What do you mean?” Mitchell seemed genuinely confused by the question.

“What does perfection look like here? How is your team supposed to be perfect?”

“Simple. They stop making the same mistakes!”

“I certainly appreciate the sound of that. But do you believe they understand what you mean, and more importantly how that happens?”

From the look on his face, Mitchell still wasn’t understanding.

“Is it really possible to be perfect?” I finally asked. “And what do you think they hear when you say that?”

Mitchell thought for a moment.

“That’s not really what I’m saying. But I see what you mean,” he said.

“You’re building some intricate stuff here. Each build looks so unique and requires different materials and finishes. So, is uniform perfection really possible?”

Mitchell didn’t respond. So, I continued.

“As of now, what happens when they do make a mistake? What are your debriefs like? How do you improve once those mistakes are discovered? And do your employees say something? Or are they more likely to hide it?”

He was speechless.

“And in your estimation, is it better to accept errors and fix them, or to not tolerate them in the first place?” I finished.

Mitchell looked a bit overwhelmed. So, we took a break. After a coffee and some time to clear his head, Mitchell and I reconvened.

“I believe with my gut what you, Jocko, and Leif preach. So, I know this is on me. It totally blows my mind, because it feels like it completely goes against everything I should expect. But I accept the ownership. My unrealistic expectations haven’t been motivating or inspiring my team, they’ve been handicapping them.”

Mitchell saw it. Thankfully, no crashing into the ramp would be necessary to learn the lesson.

“I have one more question for you: Do you think they’re making mistakes on purpose?”

Mitchell was quick to respond.

“No way. If I know anything, it’s that these folks are all loyal. And I see how hard they work and how bad they feel when something does go wrong. It’s been my approach that’s fostered this habit of concealment or lack of transparency. They don’t want to let me down.”

The next time I paid a visit, a month later, I watched another stand-up, this one much different from the one before it. Mitchell focused on the good things his team had accomplished and discussed ways they could address issues immediately, as they came up, so they could be solved right away. The faces no longer wore a sense of shame or disappointment, but rather of pride and a desire to perform even better.

“When we do make a mistake, we need to see that as an opportunity to learn and improve. And who knows,” he added, “maybe in the process, we’ll come up with a method of doing things more efficiently.”

During the stand-up, I watched a subordinate leader debrief the group on how she caught an error installing a new material the week before. She then went over a new protocol they were implementing to ensure the entire team had the learned knowledge to avoid repeating the same mistake. All the relevant information leading to the fix came directly from the team that was closest to the problem. Nobody was hiding anything. Her willingness to reveal the error in front of her team, and Mitchell, spoke to the change in attitude toward making mistakes. Obviously, she wanted to avoid them. But when they happened, everyone was invested in accepting and fixing them. That made her team better.

A good leader knows that perfection doesn’t exist. Even in an environment where it seems necessary to succeed, it still doesn’t exist. And it never will. The best teams embrace that fact and do everything they can to improve at every opportunity. That’s how they win.

Part II

THE ACTIONS OF A GOOD LEADER

6

TAKE OWNERSHIP

Ramadi, Iraq
Barracks room
June 20, 2006

THIS WAS THE SECOND INTERRUPTION in as many hours. A young Marine stood in my room. He'd entered without knocking, his face telegraphing concern.

"Sir, there's a call for you on the radio from FCT 2. I think it's important."

A wave of adrenaline rushed through my body. In the silence, I could hear the click of my laptop closing. After a deep breath, I followed him out the door to the operations room.

I had spent countless hours in that room over the previous four months. Certainly, getting radio calls was nothing new. Since arriving in Ramadi in February of 2006, I'd operated at a frenzied pace. The war raged in the capital of Al Anbar province for nearly a year before my Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (ANGLICO) team had taken up residence in Camp Ramadi. As the ANGLICO, we provided units in the coalition with fire support. This was a sprawling base on the west edge of the city that was home to nearly all coalition forces fighting in the most violent twelve square miles on the planet.

When my boots hit the ground, I'd been green, eager to experience the "real" Marine Corps that a place like Ramadi promised. Much of the violent action in Iraq in 2005–2006 happened in that city. Because my best friend,

Neal, had been deployed there since the summer of 2005, I knew well how chaotic the environment was. Danger lived not just around every corner but between the cracks of walls, on rooftops, and beneath random piles of garbage and debris in the streets.

Despite this news from Neal, I volunteered to go, guided by a sense of obligation. Ramadi was a trial by firestorm from the word go. When I first touched down on the camp's makeshift helicopter landing field, I saw instantly just how deep I had gotten myself into the "real" Corps. Mere yards away stood the headquarters of a platoon that had been in the fight for more than a year. The National Guard brigade, which hailed from Vermont, had set up residence there and served alongside Neal's battalion. They patrolled the streets of Ramadi, hoping to wrest it from the clutches of the thousands of insurgents who held control of nearly all strategic areas.

The fight had proved deadly for the guardsmen, as evidenced by a memorial erected in front of their headquarters building, the names of their ninety members killed in action scrawled across it. That shrine didn't account for the four hundred–plus wounded. Those numbers would only grow in the few remaining weeks before the Guard, and Neal, would head home. It served as an ominous marker, and within minutes of being in-country I began questioning my decision to volunteer at the epicenter of violence in the Global War on Terrorism.

"I think I made a mistake," I verbalized my apprehension to my childhood best friend. We'd grown up fantasizing about flying fast jets. What on earth were we doing here?

"Maybe!" he said with a laugh back, the truth thinly veiled behind his joke.

Reality had introduced itself. In an instant, I knew that surviving the full seven-month deployment was not guaranteed, perhaps not even likely, considering how involved my team and I would be on missions into the evil-infested corridors outside the base. The benefits of this volunteer tour —the assured post in San Diego, the return to F-18s—vanished in the desert wasteland's swirling dust.

The only solace I clung to was the thought that, as the commander of my team, I would spend most of my time coordinating missions from the

Tactical Operations Center (TOC) rather than in the streets, where the enemy waged constant and violent guerrilla war. The air-conditioned TOC, a hardened building with computers, radios, and readily available snacks, fit perfectly with what I'd imagined—a comfortable place to fight a war. But within a week of being there, I realized I was wrong. If I was going to have any positive impact on the outcome of the war and serve the Army and Marine units who needed my support, I could not be sitting behind the protection of a desk in the air-conditioned TOC. No: I would be in the field. Directly in harm's way with my Marines.

My ANGLICO team had the ability to harness the power of the most advanced aircraft in the world. The mere presence of those aircraft in the sun-bleached sky could save the lives of our troops. American aviation was a force multiplier, a tactical combat "leg up" on the enemy. Conducting missions without it seemed to me tantamount to suicide. I was one of the few qualified Forward Air Controllers in the city, and the only Marine pilot on the entire base who could serve as a liaison between the Marines and the Army. My team and I were essential.

So, I accepted my responsibility. There would be no more hiding. I added myself to a rotation of patrols that would deliver ANGLICO's capabilities as a continuous protective presence on the streets of Ramadi. Thirteen men comprised a team called a Supporting Arms Liaison Team, or SALT, and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with me. Two of the other officers in SALT-6 were qualified to control aircraft, so I broke us into three smaller Firepower Control Teams, or FCTs. Each FCT was assigned its own Humvee—the colloquial term for the military's ubiquitous High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV)—a heavy machine gun, and three additional Marines, making it a team of four, each capable of providing all of ANGLICO's capabilities to any platoon that needed it. My own FCT had only the addition of Doc, my trusted medical expert. As I ventured out into the unknown, my last remaining illusion of safety evaporated into the desert heat.

The "real" Marine Corps indeed.

I was anxious about coordinating and dividing my men, but I knew that these three equally capable teams could each deliver the necessary

firepower. Quickly, my three teams established a rotation so there would always be someone to respond to any requests for assistance from the Army, who were patrolling hell each day.

The pace felt manic. All three teams could have operated around the clock and still been overtasked with requests. Organization and prioritization needed to be implemented. So, I built a system. We would operate from our headquarters located in an abandoned Iraqi paratroop barracks on Camp Ramadi. I devised a schedule where, at any given time, one team would be in sector, one team would be planning, and one team would be on rest. It seemed the ideal way to provide our high-demand and high-impact, yet extremely limited, resources. On paper, it was smooth, easily managed, and sustainable.

However, Ramadi was anything but textbook. Demand for ANGLICO grew so quickly that managing the schedule felt nearly impossible. So much so that I had to send one of my teams to live permanently on an adjacent base across the river from ours. The two remaining teams would run what I described as “port and starboard” operations. That simply meant one team in and one team out, all the time. Our two teams rarely operated together. They worked opposite shifts for maximum coverage.

Each day, I was given a schedule for operations from the Army. I assigned my teams to the patrols as needed. Since there were far too many patrols to cover them all, we worked closely with our Army counterparts to select the ones most likely to need our support. That meant that the most dangerous patrols, in the most nefarious parts of the city, with the highest potential of contact with the enemy, got assigned an ANGLICO FCT. There would be no easy patrols.

In the first four months of our deployment, my FCTs conducted hundreds of missions in support of the full range of Army operations. From foot and vehicle patrols to sniper overwatch, surveillance and reconnaissance, observation posts, raids, and helicopter assaults, if there were soldiers in the fight, we covered them. Throughout, we coordinated the precious air assets the Marines had on hand. We all became experts in the capabilities of the precision targeting system of the UH-1 Huey helicopter, the AH-1 Cobra gunship’s deadly Hellfire missiles, the quick-

targeting AV-8B Harrier attack jet, and the multi-role F/A-18 Hornet. Each brought with it a unique array of weapons and sensors that offered vital support to those of us on the ground trying to root out a stubborn and ruthless enemy.

Kinetic engagements became routine. During the countless missions we conducted, we engaged in dozens of firefights, called in numerous air strikes, fired our personal weapons, and narrowly escaped death many times. On a handful of occasions, I evaded being shot by only a few feet. That was the rule, not the exception, for anyone in my SALT, and it was certainly much worse for the thousands of Army soldiers who navigated a full thirteen months in Iraq, nearly double my stint.

By the summer of 2006, the insanity was routine. Any anxiety, concern, or question over whether we would get into a fight vanished. It was so common it was simply a matter of when.

Given the brutal pace, it was uncommon for my two teams at Camp Ramadi to see each other. Most often, we passed each other in the vehicle staging area, like a military tag team. The incoming team, silently grateful to come in alive, would give a quick debrief to the outgoing team, providing any insight or feedback on what to expect, as if anything might be predictable. It was here where I took the scarce few minutes to check in on the other team and see how the Marines were doing. Then they were gone.

The second FCT, FCT 2, was led by a young yet exceptional captain who went by the call sign “Simple.” He was as close with his four-man team as I was with mine. “Spell,” his driver, was the ultimate rock-steady and reliable Marine. Young Lance Corporal Odom manned the turret and seemed to mature by the day. Chris, his radio operator, was a master of the equipment and a role model for my entire SALT on how to behave in war.

Simple expertly led his team and had my full trust and confidence. As I passed the baton, his quick turnover briefs inspired confidence in me that his team was in good spirits and good hands. The port and starboard ops cadence became standard, then refined. We made what we had work.

By mid-June, the Army’s strategy in Ramadi was focused on establishing combat outposts, or COPs, inside the city itself. Logic was, if we could secure a foothold inside enemy-held terrain, we could slowly take

over more and more of the city, eventually squeezing out the insurgents. They had long become accustomed to freedom of movement inside the confines of the city, so this new approach to counterinsurgency posed high risks for our troops. The insurgents responded by escalating their violent tactics and increasing their sniper activity. It was a bold, aggressive, and extremely challenging strategy that marked a huge change in how we fought the enemy.

As each COP was established, more and more soldiers would move from Camp Ramadi into their new, semipermanent homes within the city itself. This meant there was a heavy workload for ANGLICO, who had to be on-site at the COPs to support with aircraft. COP Iron, one of the first established outposts as part of this new approach, was uniquely strategic, as it bordered the southern edge of the city and provided a great vantage point for operations that pushed up to the north where the enemy lived.

On June 20, I had just completed the 8 AM-to-12 PM shift on the rooftop of COP Iron. It was the first half of an eight-hour coverage window we had agreed to, as most of the patrols and fighting occurred between eight and four o'clock.

As planned, FCT 2 covered the second four-hour block as part of our port and starboard routine. Our two teams had a few minutes to catch up as I greeted all of FCT 2 on the roof of COP Iron and gave them a turnover brief so they could seamlessly maintain support of the Army. After the brief, I returned to Camp Ramadi with my FCT to rest and begin planning the next day's operations.

Around 3 PM, I got a knock at my door from a young Marine manning the ANGLICO radio. With his usual smirk, he told me a call had come in from COP Iron. Without picking up the phone, I knew why.

"Major Berke, our patrol out of COP Iron is going long and it's a bit messy. Any chance we can have your team stay another hour or so until we're back?" The Army captain making the request was calling in deference to us. He knew I would say yes but was being polite by asking rather than just tasking FCT 2 to stay.

"You bet—they're gonna love extending a few hours! Do your thing, and I'll let them know," I said.

I then called the leader of FCT 2 to give him the good news. “Simple, the Army needs you to stay a few hours. Any issues?”

“No sir, all good. We got it,” he said, his response immediate and unwavering. That was the thing with my team—and, in fact, everyone there. Hesitation to do your duty was nonexistent. If someone needed help, our brave troops were out the door before their boots were strapped up.

“Good, because I already told them the same thing,” I said with a bit of a chuckle.

“Ha! I figured, sir. Not a problem.” Simple said.

Extension requests came often and didn’t require a long conversation. The whole discussion was essentially a formality, since we would all do whatever was needed. I went back to my room.

An hour later that same young Marine returned. Only this time he didn’t knock. And there was no smirk.

On this trip to the radio room, I was not as sure-footed. My heart rate was elevated, and I had to consciously elongate each breath. Whatever was on the other end of that call, I had to be calm. My emotions were contagious, and right then, the only thing I could do was not let them affect my team.

“Simple, Chip here. What’s up?” I asked. My chest tightened during the second it took for a response.

“Chris was hit. We’re loading him in a Bradley and headed back. We’re going straight to Charlie Medical,” Simple replied.

Simple’s voice remained steady even as he relayed this distressing news about Chris Leon, the model Marine, who was his radio operator. This was why Simple was so effective in combat. Emotion doesn’t help. He was in problem-solving mode, and this was the guy you wanted in your foxhole—rock-steady in every situation.

“Roger, I’m heading there now. I’ll keep a radio with me so you can update me on the way,” I said.

I jumped into the pickup truck I had at my disposal to get around the base and headed to the medical facility just a few hundred yards away. During the short drive, I got a follow-up call.

“Chip, he’s en route. The Army has him; he’s stable and breathing. We’re about five minutes out.” I exhaled for what felt like the first time since hearing the news. Simple was preparing the medical team for what to expect, and knew I would relay everything he told me.

My thoughts wandered to Chris, a tough-as-nails kid who’d broken his foot during the hardest part of boot camp and kept going. We saw each other every day, talked about everything and nothing as we tag-teamed patrol debriefs in the parking lot. Chris practiced martial arts and loved being a no-quit Marine. He’d pull through this.

Charlie Medical was a place I knew well. It was the central facility that provided medical support for the entire base. All casualties coming back to Ramadi, no matter their severity, came through Charlie Med. My ANGLICO Marines and I had been there dozens of times to provide assistance, donate blood, support casualty operations, and control medical helicopter flights in and out of the hospital. It was a second home for us on the base.

Until that moment, I had never been there for one of my Marines. The anxious anticipation of seeing Chris was not a sensation I relished. The weight of dread and fear pushed on my body like Gs in the cockpit. I could barely feel my legs as I drove down the long dirt road between my compound and the hospital. Would I be able to stand once I got out of the car?

I parked in the courtyard and saw Doc, who’d taken to spending his downtime at the hospital in an effort to help. His presence eased me as I relayed to him the limited information I had. Chris had been shot but was stabilized prior to being loaded into a vehicle. They were on their way back to base. Doc seemed reassured at the status but was still understandably worried.

That drive would not be easy. Chris was being transported in a Bradley Fighting Vehicle, a hulking machine that looked like a tank. The twenty-seven-ton behemoth had a compartment large enough to carry six fully loaded soldiers into combat and could engage enemy fighters with a deadly accurate 25mm chain gun. However, like other vehicles in our arsenal, it was susceptible to improvised explosive devices (IEDs). To get from

Chris's location at COP Iron to Camp Ramadi, the Bradley had to drive through a nasty section of Ramadi called Tamim that was riddled with enemy insurgents. Snipers, rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) fire, and IEDs were common in Tamim. The soldiers who selflessly risked their own lives to protect Chris's trip back to base will always have my gratitude.

We agreed it would be good for Chris to see a friendly face when he first arrived. The plan was for Doc to climb up into the back of the vehicle and lift the top end of the stretcher where Chris could see him. I would pick up the bottom end and help carry him in.

Mere minutes after I got there and coordinated with the medical team, an Army Humvee burst through the vehicle entrance, followed by the massive Bradley, its diesel engine announcing its arrival with raucous authority. Doc and I watched the ramp drop from the back. As planned, Doc climbed into the troop compartment to help lift the stretcher. Two soldiers already had control of the bottom handles, so I waited at the base of the ramp for them to pass with Chris. I would grab Chris's hand, I thought, and walk in with him to one of the operating tables inside the facility.

As the stretcher passed, I saw Chris's face, his head wrapped in field gauze, a plastic mask covering his face. His helmet and body armor had been removed. The entrance wound from the bullet was visible above his left temple. There was no need to reach for his hand.

His face, smeared with blood and matter, wore the pallor of death.

I stopped at the entrance of the operating room door as the medical team rushed to take the stretcher from the soldiers and get him onto a table. I stumbled backward, trying to compose myself. Within fifteen seconds, Doc came back out, looked me straight in the eyes, and shook his head. No words were spoken. He confirmed what I already knew.

My mind went numb. I knew I had to get back and meet Simple and the rest of the Marines who would just be returning to base. Piecing together the sequence of events after that remains elusive for me. But I distinctly recall getting in the pickup, driving halfway home, then turning around, back to Charlie Med. Denial had set in: "Maybe I misheard the doc. Maybe the wound isn't as bad as it looked. Chris is tough as nails. He'll pull

through this. Who am I to assume he's dead." In a haze, I climbed back out of the truck and found Doc inside one of the medical bays.

"Are you sure?" I asked with an unreasonable sense of hope.

"Yes sir, he's gone," he told me soberly.

I knew. And yet, I felt compelled to go back and verify the news. As if I might be able to will an alternate outcome. But there was none. Chris had been shot in the head while standing on the rooftop of COP Iron, providing overwatch for the soldiers working in the streets below. It was not survivable.

Chris was the kid with the crooked smile, like he had a secret no one else was in on. He'd overcome struggles in high school and enlisted in the Marine Corps his junior year. He had turned his life around and was newly engaged, anxiously awaiting to get home to his fiancée. Chris was only twenty years old.

When I returned to the compound, Simple and the rest of his team were unloading from their Humvee in the parking lot, standing side by side. Without contemplation or rehearsal, I simply said, "Corporal Leon is dead. Get out of your gear and meet back here in five minutes. We need to make arrangements to get him home."

I'd never before told my men that we'd lost a team member. This wasn't something I wanted to prepare for, so I hadn't. There was no prewritten speech. I didn't consider how news of that nature ought to be delivered. It was as though I opened my mouth and someone else pushed the words out. The subsequent events blended together like a kaleidoscope.

The effort to send a fallen Marine back home is Herculean. But it's also quick. Within a few hours, I found myself standing on the same helicopter pad I had arrived on four months earlier, this time watching Chris's body rise into the sky aboard a Marine Corps helo. I'd hoped never to witness an "Angel Flight," what the Marines honorably call such a somber occasion, yet there I was.

This was the worst moment in my twenty-three years of service.

And the lowest point of my life as a Marine.

I was devastated to realize as a leader that I could not protect one of my own.

All three FCTs returned to the main base for a memorial service the following day. I took everyone off missions for forty-eight hours to regroup and prepare for what was to be a brutal final three months of deployment. Given the circumstances, we would all be on edge, more fragile and unnerved than before. However, the war wasn't going to slow down because Chris was gone, and we needed to be prepared. As their leader, I needed to figure how to proceed.

The morning of the following day, I brought my entire team together to talk about our mindset moving forward. Chris was the first ANGLICO Marine killed in Iraq, and it sent shock waves through the entire community. I didn't want to lose anyone else. But we had a job to do.

While I don't remember my remarks specifically, the gist of my speech was that Chris's death was tragic and unfortunate, but that no one should blame themselves. It was a lucky shot by an insurgent sniper, one of many that claimed the lives of hundreds of American service members. We couldn't and shouldn't dwell on it. We needed to stay vigilant and committed to supporting the Army for the final three months, just like we'd done before June 20.

And with that, the war continued for all of us. While our time was filled with continued fighting and sustained combat, thankfully, the rest of my team survived and made it home.

But the burden of losing Chris has never left me. I carried the memory of him and his sacrifice in everything I did throughout the rest of my military career.

I carry it to this day.

At every opportunity, I recognize Chris Leon's sacrifice. He deserves to have his story kept alive. By doing so, we can remember the heartache of the unavoidable cost of war.

Nearly ten years to the day I returned home from Ramadi, I read *Extreme Ownership*. Before I'd even finished the first chapter, I felt as though I'd been punched in the gut. Like a tsunami, a sense of failure washed over me as I read how Jocko told his team that the failure of the fateful "blue on blue" mission was his and his alone. He stood in front of his subordinates, peers, and superiors and took complete ownership for

everything that had happened. Having been in the exact room where he spoke, I could picture it perfectly. I could imagine his words, body language, tone, and voice.

Then I thought back to the moments I spoke with my team immediately after Chris's death. I thought about what I did and didn't do as a leader. And what I said and didn't say. I never fully took ownership of what happened; instead, I deflected blame.

It was a life-changing experience for me to read *Extreme Ownership* and recognize that, in the most critical failure of my entire life, I hadn't accepted complete responsibility. In doing so, I failed the team I led.

Chris's death was one hundred percent my responsibility.

No, I didn't pull the trigger myself. Nor did I send him down the wrong alley because I hadn't done my due diligence on planning a mission. But his death was my responsibility just the same, because I was the commander—responsible for everything. Ten years after the fact, I was understanding that for the first time.

When I first spoke to my men about Chris, I served up clichés and banal platitudes. I wanted to assure them that it wasn't their fault, that they couldn't have done anything differently. I thought that hearing those words would somehow make it make sense for them. It did not. What my men needed was to see their leader take ownership of Chris's death. While the world they inhabited certainly involved random chaos and disorder, I needed to take ownership of everything I could. I failed to do that.

I should have told my team that, moving forward, I'd train each FCT on adjustments to our rooftop operations, or that I'd engage with Jocko's SEALs to learn from their ongoing counter-sniper tactics. We could implement different protocols, change procedures. Something. Anything. Instead, I did nothing but assign blame to the randomness of war, the chaos of the situation, which meant I, as their leader, had nothing to change. Which meant there were no corrections to be made.

But there were, and I did not address them that day.

After Chris was killed, I needed to make changes. I didn't, because I was comfortable excusing this tragedy as an inevitable consequence of war. We were in combat, with unavoidable danger and risks around any corner,

yet I gave up the most powerful tool in my arsenal—control. I surrendered it not only after Chris's death, but *before,* when I could have preemptively stopped those dangers.

Prior to that fateful June day, I should have responded to looming risks and fought against them. We knew sniper activity had been increasing throughout the war, and SEALs were conducting counter-sniper operations as it was reaching fever pitch. I missed opportunities to be proactive, and although it may not have guaranteed Chris's survival, I would have had more control over the outcome.

I didn't want Chris's death to be real. That's the reason that halfway to the barracks to tell my men about him, I drove back to the hospital to confirm it. It certainly wasn't something I wanted to own or admit could happen again. I didn't accept the depth of my responsibility as a leader, so I relinquished my most critical opportunity to lead. I just never understood that—until I read the book.

LESSON: Take ownership of *everything,* and don't wait

Jocko and Leif's book *Extreme Ownership* put into words a mindset that had been elusive to me. When a leader takes ownership of every problem that impacts themselves or their team, they gain the most powerful and important element to succeed and solve those problems—control. This mentality is humbling, but it's liberating to know ownership can be applied to any situation.

It is our human nature to find reasons we are not responsible for whatever is going wrong in our lives. Without ownership, when projects fall behind schedule it can easily be blamed on external factors beyond our control. Lagging sales numbers can be attributed to downturns in the market. Blame for friction-filled relationships can be foisted onto the shoulders of the other person. As humans, we are almost hardwired from birth to find a way to deflect responsibility away from ourselves. Instead, we point to anyone or anything else as the cause of our issues.

Excuses are a satisfying, albeit temporary, fix that soothe our ego and exonerate us from blame for the problems we face. We might feel as though they absolve us of responsibility, but they actually rob us of the ability to address and fix what is wrong in our life.

Taking Extreme Ownership annihilates those excuses. Which is a beautiful thing, because it destroys the single largest impediment to fixing what is wrong. It gives us the power we need to truly change what undermines our success. With Extreme Ownership, teams that are perennially behind schedule start to deliver on time. Projects that are over budget are brought under control and become profitable. Relationships that are damaged get repaired. Problems get solved.

The success of *Extreme Ownership* has validated that it is the single most important factor that can improve our lives. The book has resonated with millions of people, not only because of the compelling war stories, but because regardless of who the readers are, where they work, or what issues they are facing, the lessons apply and transform people's lives. Because if you have the humility to look at a problem, and accept it as your fault and yours to solve, you can get the problem fixed. For managers, frontline workers, first responders, parents, bosses, subordinates, and any human alive, Extreme Ownership works.

But it won't bring back Chris.

Accepting my failure in his death ushers in a sense of guilt and disappointment that I don't savor. I trained him. I deployed with him. I sent him on that mission. I was responsible. Acknowledging my ownership in that tragedy is by far the most humbling realization I have ever had to come to. And it is also the most frustrating, because the lesson I take from it isn't retroactive. I can't go back and fix the problem.

I take comfort in the knowledge that claiming ownership of Chris's death has helped me grow as a leader, teacher, father, and husband in countless ways. And I have used that lesson to ensure I do everything in my power to not let something like that happen again. And if it does, I know my response will be different. That knowledge has drastically improved my life and the lives of the people around me.

But there is an even better way to claim ownership than simply acknowledging that the failures of the past are yours. You can look to prevent and take responsibility for problems in the future.

The ultimate form of ownership is what we call “preemptive ownership.” In my years of talking leadership with Jocko, Leif, and the rest of the Echelon Front team, inevitably, the loss of our teammates in combat comes to the fore. It is an inescapable reality for all of us who came home from war without all our teammates. And all of us wish we could do something different to save those guys and bring them home.

But we can’t. No matter how much ownership we take, we still struggle with this devastating loss. However, rather than let that reality debilitate us, it has helped us develop the concept of ownership even further. A leader who truly wants to take control and care for their people will look for potential problems *before* they occur and prevent them from happening.

As preemptive ownership is applied and evolves into a way of thinking, it becomes a liberating and powerful force. It compels us as leaders to look at every facet of our personal and professional lives, project into the future where the greatest risks lie, and address them before they create problems. In an ideal world, this would happen with every challenge. That’s impossible. But being proactive is far superior to being reactive.

Preemptive ownership requires we look for problems brewing on the horizon, rather than be surprised by their sudden arrival. Minor issues often fester into devastating challenges because we ignore their warning signals. But if we pay attention, not only can they be avoided, we can know how to respond in these tough moments when our tendency might be to do the opposite.

However, this can be done incorrectly. At Echelon Front, we teach the concept of balance for all leadership behaviors and define the symptoms that reveal when we have lost it. If you are debilitated, live in constant fear, overwhelmed by hypothetical contingencies, and feel like there’s too much to do, you are out of balance and taking too much ownership. When it’s applied properly, you feel more capable, comfortable, and confident to solve more problems than ever before. Preemptive ownership intends to empower you, not overpower you, as a leader.

Don’t wait for a problem to grow before you fix it. Don’t allow the important aspects of your life to suffer before addressing them. Don’t blindly react. Don’t reflexively respond. Take ownership of everything—preemptively—to prevent problems from ever occurring. It is the most powerful way to apply Extreme Ownership in your life and ensure that the people you care about the most live the best life they possibly can.

Real-World Application

“How am I supposed to take ownership of something I didn’t even *do*?”

It was a fair question from someone who was frustrated, yet genuinely looking to apply the mindset to his life.

Eric was at a conference in San Diego where I was conducting a full-day workshop to train a group of leaders in the mortgage industry. It was an event that brought together nearly a hundred team members from across the country to collaborate, talk best practices, and introduce the Echelon Front leadership principles.

After several hours, we had discussed all the Laws of Combat, Mindsets for Victory, and Extreme Ownership. We had even completed our first hands-on exercise, which turned the theory into practice and gave the team practical tools to apply once they returned home to their own teams. It was a dynamic and engaged group that embraced the principles and looked to employ them. We were wrapping up the morning session with questions and answers, getting ready to break for lunch.

But Eric wasn’t sold.

“I’m not trying to be difficult, and I know it’s time for the break. I like what you’re saying, but some things are just not my fault,” he vented.

“I hear you. What’s on your mind? Can you be specific?” I pressed.

“Yes, but it sounds a little petty, and it’s not even a work issue. It’s personal,” he said.

“No worries. In fact, applying Extreme Ownership at home can be as powerful as applying it in our professional lives. You’re talking about the people you care about the most. I can’t think of a better situation to dig into,” I said.

“And let me say that Extreme Ownership isn’t just about war, TOPGUN, or make-or-break deals for the company. It’s about everything,” I continued. “So, what do you got?”

“Okay, you asked for it.” Eric chuckled.

“I got a text from my wife last night that said, ‘The car was out of gas, thanks a lot.’” We both smiled at a text just about everyone in the audience could relate to. Clearly, Eric’s wife was frustrated and venting to him.

I waited for him to offer up more detail.

“She told me she was late getting my oldest boy to his soccer game because she had to go to the gas station beforehand. She’s blaming me for that and for my son getting in trouble with the coach.

“I flew out here yesterday afternoon. My flight left around one and I had to run to the store to get some toiletries for my trip. It’s a one-mile trip from my house to the store. I bought a handful of things and was gone no more than fifteen minutes. I barely put two miles on the car. I know you’re saying to take ownership of everything, but how is it my fault the car is out of gas?” Eric explained, feeling justified in his frustration.

“Well, that’s a good scenario to use, even though it seems like a small thing. In fact, it may be the best example of ownership we can use, because it involves probably the most important person in your life!” I replied.

“So, let’s look at it from her point of view. Where is she right now?” I asked.

“Home.”

“Where’s home?”

“Milwaukee.”

“How’s Milwaukee in March?” I asked sarcastically, knowing the answer.

“Cold!” We both laughed.

“And where are you right now?” I asked as we both peered out the panoramic window of the hotel conference room at its near-perfect view of the Pacific Ocean and unblemished SoCal blue sky.

“Here. In San Diego,” he said, with a slightly more sheepish chuckle.

“And what is she doing right now?” I continued.

“She’s taking care of the kids and handling business.” Eric paused. “By herself,” he conceded, understanding that he was by far in a more enjoyable place than his wife.

“So, it’s easy to understand her frustration and that text?” I asked.

“Sure, I get it. But lately it seems like it’s always something I’m being blamed for. How is the car being out of gas my fault? I don’t envy her situation for the next two days, but I barely drove it. It was on empty when I got in, just like when I got out. I really didn’t use any gas! I know she’s annoyed and that’s fine, but you said take ownership of everything. I don’t see how I take ownership of the car being out of gas. How am I to blame?” Eric was still struggling with the situation.

“Ownership isn’t about assigning blame. It’s about taking responsibility for problems and finding a way to solve them. It’s about embracing the idea that anything that affects you or the team—in this case, the ultimate team: your family—is *your* problem to solve. Is there something you could have done differently here, and is there a reason to look at this differently?” I asked.

“How do you mean?” he questioned.

“Walk me through what would have happened had you put gas in the car,” I continued.

“I didn’t even know it was on empty until she texted me!” he pushed back.

“I understand, but humor me. If you knew it when you got in the car, could you have done something different?” I pushed again.

“Yeah. I would have put gas in the car.”

“Okay, cool. I agree. Why didn’t you?”

“I was in a rush and I wasn’t thinking about it.”

“Fair, that’s totally understandable. But if we change our mindset about something as minor as filling up the car with gas, what would the impact be?”

Eric paused, then proceeded to narrate a new scenario. “She wouldn’t have had to stop by the gas station on the way to practice. Marcus would have been on time. It would have been a nonevent.”

“Exactly. And what else?”

“Her day would have been better. She would have been less frustrated and been on time.”

“Do we want that for her?”

“Of course—that’s my wife. I just want her to be happy. She’s home, and it’s freezing, and she’s running around with three kids, and I’m here. I’m playing golf tomorrow!” he said, his voice cracking a bit.

I interjected to help him pause. “This isn’t about who ran the car out of gas. We know you didn’t do that. But when we affirmatively look for problems and solve them, it helps the team. Simple as that. In this case, had you looked for it in advance, you would have filled it up. She probably wouldn’t have even noticed. It’s a problem you could have solved before it even happened. And had you done it, there might not have been a ‘Thank you,’ or even an acknowledgment at all. But it would have made her life better. And if it made her life better, who else would benefit?”

“Marcus for sure—he would have been on time!”

“And who else?”

“Me.”

“Exactly. You benefit too. You *win* too, just by taking ownership, even of something that might not seem like your ‘fault’ on the surface. There are so many things you can take ownership of. Even the most seemingly trivial things like taking out the trash or putting gas in the car. I know you don’t want to do it, but when you do, those problems are fixed *before* they even happen. You’re taking preemptive ownership! And over time, that becomes a habit. And you can look for ways to do that in every facet of life, with everyone in your world. They benefit, and you benefit. It’s your pathway to success,” I concluded.

Ownership is a mindset that becomes a behavior. And it works best when you apply it everywhere you can, not just after the fact. Preemptively taking ownership is optimal. A husband taking ownership helps his wife be a better mother for their kids, a better spouse for him, and a better person for herself. It may seem like a small thing, but don’t underestimate how impactful it can be on every aspect of a person’s life.

An hour later, Eric returned and asked to talk to me privately. He was holding back tears. “At lunch, I called my wife and apologized. She laughed

it off and didn’t make it a big deal. But I told her that I realized there was a lot more I could do to help her, and us. I was dead serious, too. I wasn’t even thinking about her when we started the training today, I was just looking to apply this in my business.”

He took a long pause and continued, “This has been the most humbling morning I’ve had in a long time. Truthfully, it’s been tough at home. It seems like little things like this have been piling up. It hasn’t been fun, and I was secretly glad to be leaving on this trip. I had no idea how today would impact me personally. I have a lot to work on, and I owe a lot more to my wife and family than I realized. Thank you for spending all that time just on a tank of gas.”

We shook hands. “Don’t thank me—you did the important part. You did the work and applied the principles. Good job, man. Take ownership of everything in your life. Everything. It doesn’t matter how trivial it seems, don’t wait for problems to happen. Fix them beforehand, and everyone’s life will get better. Everyone wins, because of you taking ownership.”

Eric’s story is indicative of how preemptive ownership works. It may seem ridiculous to connect these two stories, but that’s how powerful ownership is. When you accept your responsibilities and do everything in your power to control them, sooner rather than later, you can prevent problems big and small. Practicing ownership needs to become a habit, one that permeates every part of your life every minute of your day. The more you’re owning each small task or issue, the more prepared you are for the inevitable bigger problems that test you.

For any leader, losing someone you are responsible for is the greatest test. I experienced this in war when we lost Chris Leon. Jocko, Leif, and generations of military leaders have experienced this loss since the beginning of time. Loss is something we all experience. Sometimes it’s relatively minor, like a talented coworker who was unsatisfied and moved onto another company. It can also be life-altering, like a divorce that tears apart a family. In these moments, we wish we could turn back the clock and change our behavior.

While ownership doesn’t guarantee an outcome, it gives us the most control we can possibly have. Even if we just start utilizing it in minute

daily events, we see that it works, regardless of the magnitude of the problem. So, filling the gas tank is no longer a routine chore—it's how we save our marriage. Ownership applies to everything.

7

LISTEN

Pacific Beach, California
One mile west of Interstate 5
September 26, 2006

IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF THE AFTERNOON, and the blinding sun lit up every side alley and driveway. My eyes scanned left to right and back again as my vehicle moved methodically down the street. A kid on a bike wore a backpack. I instinctively changed lanes, giving him a wide berth. There could have been danger anywhere—an IED in a trash can, a sniper on a rooftop. Observing, watching everything for potential threats was an inexorable part of life in Ramadi during the height of the insurgency. So much so that it was as much a reflex as blinking. On that drive, that bright sunny day, I wasn't thinking as much as I was anticipating and ready to act.

In Iraq, inside my Humvee, things operated exactly how I'd wanted them to. Procedures were in place, roles and responsibilities had been established, and good habits had formed. No one talked unless it was relevant to every member of the truck. If not, the rule was to keep quiet, for there to be no extraneous comms.

In the Humvee, all five of us aboard had a sector to cover with our eyes, our attention laser-focused. Our lives depended on it, and we all took it dead serious. The senior enlisted Marine, Sergeant Martinez, drove. Given his seat in the front left of the truck, he prioritized his visual scan in that direction. Mo, my communications specialist, sat behind him and split his

time between reaching forward to manipulate the radios mounted on the dashboard and looking through the small rear-door window. Doc, the medical expert, managed his best in the back right. And Perez, the turret gunner who acted as forward observer, sat above and outside the truck on every mission, with the best view of all. With his ability to pivot 360 degrees, he could quickly swing in any direction to add additional eyes, and of course the 7.62-caliber M249 heavy machine gun, to whatever sector needed the assist.

I wouldn't wish being in the back of a Humvee on anyone. It's cramped, the windows offer almost no useful view, and you're constantly dodging the legs and butt of the turret gunner spinning around inches from your face. With the limited view for the rear occupants, Perez often biased his turret toward the back end of the vehicle, especially when we were at the tail of a convoy, which we often were.

As vehicle commander, I was in charge and sat in the right front passenger seat. I also time-shared between scanning my sector and talking on the radios, which Mo ensured were always operating and on the right frequency. Naturally, I did most of the talking, given my responsibilities as both a Forward Air Controller and team leader. It was fairly uncommon for anyone else to say anything, unless they were either answering my questions or calling out something that no one else saw. There was never any idle chatter. Ever.

I had trained my team on communications discipline and espoused the value of speaking aloud only critical information. It was best for the entire truck to avoid all extraneous chatter. After all, a lot of our time was spent looking for IEDs and potential enemy fighters. If any of us saw either, we wanted to be able to call it out and alert the entire team immediately.

Unlike a traditional military unit, insurgents didn't wear uniforms or identify themselves in any obvious way. Instead, they blended in with the locals and were almost impossible to spot. The only way to distinguish them from the general population was to catch them committing a hostile act. Firing a machine gun or a rocket-propelled grenade were obvious indicators of an enemy that warranted immediate retaliation. While common, they were by no means their primary method of attack. The IED

was the weapon of choice, for an enemy could easily drop a small explosive on the side of a road, then evaporate into thin air. Once it was in place, a remote detonator triggered the device on an unsuspecting convoy or patrol. IEDs were deployed to inflict maximum damage. It was every insurgent's dream to obliterate a thin-skinned Humvee, eliminating it and its occupants.

An IED can split open a Humvee like a tuna can. It can snap axles like toothpicks, catapult tires hundreds of feet away, shatter windows, and ignite fuel tanks while flipping the entire truck upside down. I had witnessed the gruesome aftermath of such attacks more times than I care to recall. Those of us who arrived on the scene after a detonation will never forget the mangled vehicles and twisted bodies that bore the brunt of an IED. Each of us in the Humvee knew we faced the potential of a similar attack, and the fear could be debilitating. Total vigilance was the best and often only hedge against a merciless battlefield where we were a constant target. We had to be on alert all the time and couldn't afford to get arrogant or complacent, even for a second.

After months of training and over a hundred real-world operations, we'd gelled as a team, and we were good. Really good. The communications flowed as if choreographed. We were timed and impeccably aligned, and it gave me a ton of confidence given the dangers of Ramadi, where things could change in an instant.

I heard the din of arbitrary chitchat grow. The vehicle filled with background noise and voices, but the words were indiscernible, and I was losing focus. What were they talking about? There was nothing to discuss. We should have been closely observing everything, exactly as we'd always operated. Everything else was superfluous. I could feel myself becoming agitated. The cacophony grew until I couldn't take it anymore.

"STOP TALKING!" I barked. Abruptly, and loudly.

Everyone froze. My sharp words had sliced through the chatter like a blade.

But the inhabitants of this car were not my troops. There were no dirt roads with explosives buried in them, no shooters on watch. On that particular bright, sunny day, I was not in my Humvee and Ramadi was half a world away.

My fifteen-hour flight home from the Middle East had touched down not an hour earlier. I was finally home in San Diego. Yet, somehow, I'd already lost my sense of place and slipped back to the menace of Iraq.

While my mind wandered to the ravaged streets of Ramadi, in reality I was ensconced in the comfortable leather driver's seat of a Jeep Grand Cherokee, with my wife and mom, the two most important people in my world, beside me. The cars around me weren't gunning to take us out but merely honking and jockeying for position on a crowded Southern California freeway.

I thought back to the scene at the airport. Seeing Whitney's beaming face in baggage claim had made my heart leap into my throat. Her arms wrapped around me in a hug I thought she'd never end. My mom waited patiently for her turn. She eventually got her moment when Whitney ducked out to bring the car around, and the sense of relief on her face outdid those she exhibited on any of my previous returns.

After I grabbed my two green seabags—everything I'd had with me for my entire deployment—Whitney met us curbside. I'd imagined this moment for months. The memory of her face—her clear blue eyes, that smile … those visuals kept me alive in some of my life's darkest moments. And there she was. No longer only a photograph taped to my barracks wall or a voice on the other end of an occasional phone call, but my future, my wife, the love of my life. I thought about how fortunate I was as I loaded the car and hopped in the driver's seat, relishing the comfort and relaxion of my first SoCal cruise home.

As I pulled away from the curb, Whitney and my mom asked questions in rapid fire. What was the flight like? Was I hungry? Tired? Should we go out to eat? I must want to get out of those stale clothes. Maybe a shower? Then food? Initially, I engaged in the banter as we got underway for the short drive. There was a clear blue sky and the sun felt warm as San Diego's laid-back vibe quickly permeated my skin. It had been a while since I'd driven, but the instincts quickly returned—using the turn signals, looking behind me for traffic as I changed lanes, watching the side mirrors, and being aware of other drivers not paying attention.

Very quickly, however, I mentally left the conversation, and the idle chatter faded as I started noting my surroundings, exactly as I had on patrol. What was that pedestrian carrying? What was in that trash pile near that gutter? My eyes scanned the road in front of and around me every few seconds; my brain zeroed in on the potential evils under a traffic cone or in a motorcycle rider's saddlebags. I have no recollection of exiting the highway. It wasn't until I turned onto a quiet side street in my neighborhood that I recognized the growing dissonance in my head.

"STOP TALKING!" I replayed in my head the sharp words I'd spat out at the people I loved the most. Why did I do that? What was wrong with me?

I'd startled everyone by telling them to shut up. But no one was more stunned than I. Turns out, voices carry much better in the insulated cabin of a Grand Cherokee than they do in a rattling Humvee. Yet, as it had become habit over the last seven months, the full force of my diaphragm propelled my voice into the car, and it boomed as if coming through an amplifier set to 11.

Whitney and my mom had stiffened; their faces had immediately flushed as silence blanketed the car. As the tread of the tires hummed across the seams of the road, I felt my own face turn red with embarrassment. The sound of my own voice had snapped me back to the present. It scared everyone, including me.

I had been stateside for less than a full hour, including all the time spent taxiing on the tarmac, picking up my belongings from baggage claim, and loading them into the SUV. The reunion should have been magnificent. I had survived Ramadi and made it home alive.

I have no idea what Whitney and my mom were talking about, but whatever it was, it had become a huge distraction and I couldn't listen to another word of it. Those harsh words had erupted out of my mouth as if someone else had said them. As quickly as I realized what I'd said and how I'd said it, I regretted it.

They both apologized immediately, and unnecessarily. I knew I was the one who was out of line, and was thoroughly embarrassed by my outburst. I apologized as well, tried to laugh it off with some inane joke I can't even

recall and move past it. It came off exactly as it was: hollow and awkward. The final two minutes of that drive to the house remain some of the most uncomfortable moments of my entire marriage.

Despite an amazing afternoon settling into my new home, wrestling with my overly excited dogs, and embracing the new reality that Whitney and I were finally going to start our life together, a nagging voice in my head kept saying that what happened in the car wasn't an isolated incident.

Still, I tried to ignore it.

But I didn't have long to wait for that nagging voice to be proved correct. Sometime in the middle of that first night, I jolted awake in a panic. My body lurched upright as I patted my chest to assess the damage from the blast, only to recognize a moment later that I was in my own bed. Whitney's wide eyes stared back at me in silent shock. I was panting, drenched in sweat, trying to collect myself.

She put her arms around me and held me until I quieted down, the embarrassment of the car ride home replaced by concern and fear. For better or for worse indeed.

It was the first installment of what became a recurring dream I brought home with me from Ramadi. It was abstract. All I could see from my first-person point of view was a grenade rolling around on the ground at my feet. I tried sweeping it away with the muzzle of my rifle like a hockey goalie does a loose puck that's slid uncomfortably close to the net. I'd bat at it futilely a few times, unable to knock it away, until the grenade exploded and jolted me awake. The dream wasn't me reliving any reality—nothing like that had ever happened to me. But it was vivid, terrifying, and extremely frustrating. It was also a regular and unwelcome intruder as I learned to share a bed with my new wife.

Whitney was my person. She was everything I wasn't, which was why I fell in love with her. As a couple, we seemed to have been made to balance each other. If I was aggressive, she was calm. When I was rough, she was smooth. Her humility tempered my bravado. She could be reasonable when I was rash. All the attributes I lacked—and there were many—she seemed to provide. She was the yin, opposite to me, but together we were interconnected, as if collectively we made one complete person.

She was also the prettiest and nicest girl I'd ever met.

While we were different in so many ways, she always felt like my equal—or, honestly, in some ways my superior. And there was enough fire under her calm demeanor that if the equanimity were to get out of balance, she would let me know. That balance which sat between the vast differences of our two personalities is what brought us together. Within weeks of meeting her just as I started my tour at TOPGUN, I was pretty sure we would get married.

We met at a wedding in Maryland. A friend of mine was marrying a friend of hers. He was a military guy like me, a Marine buddy. The bride was a friend of Whitney's whom she'd met at grad school. Once we were introduced at the rehearsal dinner, it was clear that we instantly liked each other, so much so that I was actually looking forward to the wedding. Over champagne toasts and a forgettable entrée, we shared our life stories. By the time the bouquet was tossed, I felt as though I'd known her for years. We went out the following night, and the day after that I returned to TOPGUN, and began sketching out a plan for her to come visit.

At the start of our relationship, life was nothing but fun. Having virtually no connection to anything remotely military, Whitney's first experience of Marine life came compliments of what could only be described as a fantasy with a boyfriend who was an instructor at TOPGUN. Whatever image she had created about what her life could be looked more like a movie than reality.

We spent our first year dating long-distance after she finished a postgraduate physical therapy program at The George Washington University in DC. That was another reason I fell for this beautiful girl with hair like pure sunshine. She was so active and thought a degree in exercise science, with the intention of helping people get out of physical pain, seemed like an excellent form of service. Now, as a full-time physical therapist, she knew how to listen to patients and truly hear what they were saying.

Because of my military career, or maybe since the title "TOPGUN instructor" was awfully tough to resist, Whitney's family instantly warmed to me. It made her move to northern Nevada to live with me seamless. By

the end of our second year of dating, upon crossing the finish line of the Maui Marathon, I proposed and made the inevitable official.

We spent our third year together much like the second, only with the added fun of planning a wedding. She stayed at our townhome in Lake Tahoe while I spent weekdays at Naval Air Station Fallon, about two hours away. Our relationship was a crawl, walk, run scenario, as the time we spent together grew gradually over our tour in Fallon. She acclimated to how busy life could get being married to a Marine and the senior instructor pilot at TOPGUN. While the class had me Monday through Friday, she had me on weekends.

“Busy and stressful” is the best way to describe working at TOPGUN. The hours were as long as any job I’ve had. As the Training Officer, I shouldered the huge responsibility of training students during wartime. Flying, while fun, is also dangerous, even in training. Midair collisions, emergencies, and all the perils of dynamic fighter aviation were always a risk. And the level of effort required to meet our obligation to succeed at TOPGUN was always near the limit.

Yet, there was another side to that coin. It is a school above all else, with the mission of training, but in between flights and classes, distractions were never hard to find. Many a night was spent partying at the Officers’ Club. Weekends found us skiing in Lake Tahoe. We lived barely a mile from a small ski resort, where we’d be whenever there was snow. And there was so much snow. There was alcohol, parties, days off, trips, vacations between class, and anything else that could be crammed in between the best flying a pilot could ever dream of. “Work hard, play hard” felt more like a way of life than a cliché.

But in Ramadi, there was no play, no parties, and no weekends. There was nothing but war, chaos, fear, and death. You could just as easily die walking to the chow hall as you could in a firefight in the middle of the city. Sadly, that proved true on numerous occasions on my Forward Operating Base, which was mortared regularly by an unrelenting enemy that looked for every possible way to kill an American service member. You were never safe in Ramadi. I narrowly survived a rocket attack that flew feet above my head while I was using a port-a-potty. I luckily escaped fragments from a

mortar attack while sitting in a lounge chair chatting with a friend during a rare chance to telephone home. There were no breaks. Ever. You were “on” all the time.

Three months after Whitney and I tied the knot, and the day after my last class at TOPGUN ended, I was already leaving her behind. Voluntarily, I deployed to Japan for what was supposed to be an easy, albeit solo, yearlong deployment to be a Forward Air Controller. But as soon as that deployment started, another call for volunteers went out. I summarily requested an additional deployment to Ramadi. It came with the guarantee of returning to F-18s in San Diego after I’d finished, so I spent the final seven months of that year fighting a brutal and relentless war.

All told, Whitney and I spent our only two full weeks together on our honeymoon. I was gone for twelve of our first fifteen months of marriage—the last seven of those in Iraq. Whitney’s life went from Hollywood movie to fear, anguish, and worry, almost overnight.

And here I was, returning to her side, bringing with me a short fuse and fitful, interrupted sleep. My frustration with the perceived carelessness of everyone around me and my regular nightmare lasted for months. Whitney wasn’t spared any of it, and it very quickly changed the nature of my relationship with her for the worse.

I became more vocal with the things I didn’t like and practically demanded compliance anytime I wanted quiet. Filled with sympathy, a sense of helplessness, and a desire to make me happy, she responded by becoming more and more inclined to stay quiet altogether.

As the weeks ticked by, my hypersensitivity to my external environment began to subside—if slowly. The nightmare became less common. Whitney associated the improvement with how she’d been interacting with me. It was as if she settled into her role as the listener and validated my role as the talker, because in her mind it was helping me get past the baggage I brought back from Iraq.

While her silence was all in deference to me, she was losing her voice in our marriage. She had less and less to say to someone who, on a whim, could easily shut her out and stop listening. That balance between us, which I’d come to love and rely on, was evaporating. She wasn’t herself. We

weren’t us. Our marriage had become like the inside of my wartime Humvee. I’d established the ground rules for all communication and was the primary and often only talker. I was the vehicle commander and she merely a passenger.

This was never going to work for her as my spouse, partner, peer, and equal. It certainly wouldn’t work when we became parents. Every facial expression, every room exit, every hand gesture, and every outright comment I made, all expressing the same demand for quiet, was killing our relationship. And I knew it. I could feel it. And despite her valiant attempt to show understanding and accommodate me, I knew she felt it, too.

If this was going to work, that needed to end. Foremost, I had to figure out what made me so inclined to limit Whitney’s voice without putting any restraints on my own. Discovering that for myself wasn’t happening.

My best friend, Neal, and I grew up with the same dream. He was also an F-18 pilot, and had recently completed a tour in Ramadi right before me. In fact, I replaced him there as a Forward Air Controller. So, I knew there was no one more qualified to thoroughly understand what I was going through. We talked all the time. He shared his lessons from ground combat and what he brought home. He’d also felt a massive amplification of his emotions for months after his return, and it didn’t bring out the best in him, either. He knew exactly what I had been through, walked the same streets, fought the same insurgents, and suffered similar losses. He got it. He knew me better than anyone and understood exactly what was going on. He was a godsend whose guidance and counsel could help me understand how to figure this out before it was too late.

Undoubtedly Iraq was the most stressful experience of my life. In my soul-searching and genuine desire to correct the problems I was causing at home, I was forced to look inward at what I was doing to contribute to the problem. Blaming the violence in Iraq or the excessive stress of a combat deployment wasn’t going to help me. Those were scapegoats, and offered little relief or helpful explanation for the deterioration of my marriage I was causing. I was the problem, and I had to dig deep enough to identify the behavior that was the real culprit.

I had to acknowledge my awful tendency to talk too much. And worse was my expectation that others limit how much they were talking. It was a brutal combination.

You talk a lot as a flight leader. When I led missions as an F-18 pilot, I was the primary communicator for all decisions on which way my element (vernacular for “formation”) would go and what enemies we would engage. I was constantly directing the other aircraft under my command. The flight lead is responsible for talking. I was so accustomed to it that it sowed the seeds of a habit.

You talk a lot as an instructor and teacher. When I taught tactics and techniques at TOPGUN, it was only natural that I dominated most of the debriefs for students who were learning the skills I had already mastered. On a daily basis I would speak for hours, giving lectures, providing feedback, and teaching techniques. I had a captive audience, who soaked up my words for their benefit. So, the habit was reinforced.

You talk a lot as a vehicle commander in war. It’s a virtual necessity for the vehicle commander and FAC to be the ones talking, and I was both. I was there solely to communicate with the airplanes overhead dropping bombs, the patrol leaders we supported, and the vehicle occupants who couldn’t see anything. In that environment, especially with the disciplined communications we preached, it was incumbent on everyone else to stay silent. So, my habit became entrenched.

My fourteen years in the Marines as a pilot, TOPGUN instructor, and Forward Air Controller routinely placed me in the role of the primary communicator—the one who did most of the talking. The unique and excessive stress of my tour in Iraq magnified, in the worst way possible, the habit I had unknowingly developed. It stands to reason I would experience the same challenge in my daily life.

But my marriage wasn’t the military. There was no chain of command or ranks. We were just a couple. A team. Equals. Assuming the role of the primary decision-maker or voice for Whitney wasn’t something I wanted. In fact, the opposite was true. I loved her independent nature and capacity to thrive on her own, just as she had done over the last year. Stifling that was the last thing I wanted to do. I loved listening to Whitney.

While not necessarily easy at first, the correction was simple. I needed to listen more. That was it. I had to recognize, identify, and intercept my typical path to be the first, loudest, and often only voice in the room. And that's exactly what I did.

I just stopped talking so much.

Instead, I got back in the habit of inviting her to be herself, just as she had been before Ramadi.

Ironically, it led to a discovery I hadn't anticipated. Shifting my talking-to-listening ratio also taught me to listen to myself.

For months, I had been trying to silence the voices in my head that felt frustrated and angry. I did everything I could to stifle those emotions, but it proved impossible. So, instead of trying to block them out, I turned them on their head. If I did wake up in a sweat checking for wounds from a phantom grenade, instead of reacting emotionally about it, I took time to think about what was on my mind—I listened to myself. Every time I did that, I realized that the dream reflected some frustration I was feeling at work or elsewhere in my life. It was simply my brain's way of telling me I was annoyed or angry. So, it became a voice to listen to and to help identify what was subconsciously causing the problem.

The more I listened to my own internal voice, the more I was able to recognize and diagnose whatever emotions I was feeling. Listening to myself, acknowledging what I was feeling, and dealing with whatever that issue was almost immediately improved my own mental state, just as it improved our marriage when I listened to Whitney more.

Listening was how I understood what was going on and what allowed me to get past it. Ignoring my own voice was as dumb as ignoring Whitney's.

Whenever I felt the impulse to share something that was going on with me, I checked myself, and tried to measure how much my voice was taking up the space between us. I started to defer to her voice again, and she started opening up to me more about what was happening with her—her concerns and joys about our future, her wins and challenges at work. Her voice started taking center stage with mine again.

Something else occurred to me, too. Whitney had been the better leader throughout our impasse, because she had been listening to me, to what I needed. Just as she did with her patients when they tried to explain their pulled hamstring or torn rotator cuff, my wife was letting me do the talking so she might better understand how to help me.

Things between Whitney and me got better. Whenever the voice in my head spoke, I listened. It ultimately helped lead me back to my normal life and my marriage. And I'm forever grateful to my wife that she allowed me the time and space to figure out that all I needed to do was stop talking … and listen.

LESSON: Listening is the most overlooked and underestimated leadership behavior

We as human beings habitually want to talk. Especially when our responsibility at work or home increases, our position of authority compels us to dominate the conversation. And that's not surprising, since the traditional view of leadership depicts the person in charge as the one doing the talking. The stereotypical leader—especially one in the military—is barking orders and telling subordinates what to do. But in reality, that's not always the best approach. In fact, it's often the opposite of what a good leader should do.

Listening is a crucial part of effective communication, yet we rarely are taught this fact. In school, we're trained how to craft a perfect sentence or present a persuasive argument. Using our vocabulary is highly encouraged by professors. We respect great orators who can captivate an audience, elevating them as leaders. But I cannot remember a single teacher or college professor ever explaining how to truly listen and hear someone.

Certainly, my inclinations after the war stemmed from the deeply ingrained habits that I adopted leading troops. But at the same time, they completely undermined a pivotal behavior of leadership—listening.

THE 5 RELATIONSHIP COMPONENTS

Trust
Respect
Listening
Influence
Care

At Echelon Front, we start nearly all training programs with an Organizational Baseline Assessment (OBA), which evaluates how well the leaders perform the foundational leadership principles we teach. By asking a company's broader workforce a series of survey questions, we can analyze their responses and establish a baseline for their organization. Most of the surveys are conducted on a sliding-scale format from 1 to 10, which produces a raw score for each of the attributes we measure.

The most useful feedback, however, comes at the end of the assessment, where we ask open-ended questions. We first ask the employees, "From a leadership perspective, what does your company do well?" Almost always, the answer is … "communication." We also ask employees, "Where is the biggest opportunity for the company to improve?" Again, almost always, the answer is … "communication." We end by asking for the one word that reflects the single most desired behavior in their leaders. Overwhelmingly, the answer is "listening." Across thousands of OBAs, the results are nearly the same. Good leaders are good communicators. Bad leaders are bad communicators. And the best leaders listen.

When you take over conversations, you miss out on critical information, disrespect the team, and lose your own ability to be heard. Constantly telling everyone what to do, doing all the talking, making all the decisions, and expecting your team to do nothing but listen doesn't work in the long run, not for you and not for the team. If all you do is endlessly transmit, eventually you'll lose your audience. The more you talk, the less people will listen. It's as simple as that. And there's nothing less effective than a leader no one listens to. But if you can become a person of few but

powerful words, you can almost guarantee that when you do speak, everyone will listen.

Listening is often the best way to help the team, and demonstrates how much you care for them. You can hear what your people need, whether they say it directly or by your reading between the lines. Employees who feel heard tend to work harder and perform better. By talking through their ideas, these individuals better understand their problems and discover, for themselves, the best way to solve them. They are happier at work and ultimately better able to articulate their needs to their bosses or subordinates, because they know it won't fall on deaf ears. These team members are more willing to go beyond their position, because they consider themselves contributors and a crucial part of a team.

And this rule doesn't just apply to your professional life. As in my story, this lesson can impact your personal life, in the relationships that matter the most. The logic at home is exactly the same. When your partner feels like an active participant in every conversation, it fosters quick resolution to potential problems. Listening to your children reinforces that what they say matters and actively demonstrates how they can and should listen to others. When you set an example and focus on the other person more than yourself, you model one of the best behaviors as a parent. No one ever wants to feel ignored or less important than your need to text on your phone or get one more thing done on your to-do list. If the people under your roof feel heard, it's easier for them to hear you when it's your turn to talk.

Thankfully, good listening is a skill that can be learned. Keep your attention on the person speaking without allowing distractions to creep in. When it's an important conversation, you can even take notes to illustrate how much you value their remarks. After they are done speaking, you can ask earnest follow-up questions to clarify their perspective. These tactics not only help the person speaking feel attended to but also further your own comprehension.

Alternatively, you can utilize the "Readback," an effective communication tool that we teach at Echelon Front. A Readback ensures that leaders have effectively communicated and listened properly by reflecting and reiterating the speaker's main points back to them. When

leaders use this approach, the advantages of active listening are clear. Plans are devised without direct orders and aligned without miscommunication, and every team member is understood and heard.

But being a successful leader isn't exclusively about listening to other people. Listening to ourselves plays a huge role in how we lead. Intuition, gut reactions, a sixth sense, self-awareness—call it what you will, these feelings are powerful forces that impact our behavior. They are developed by listening to our own voice. I didn't pay attention to the voice inside my head after returning from Ramadi, and consequently, I undermined my relationships and well-being. But when we are in tune with how we feel, we gain control over our behavior and responses. The more we listen internally, the better we can master ourselves.

Self-awareness isn't always easy, but it's crucial to being a successful leader, in business and life. Often, it's difficult to comprehend just how much time we're talking. But there is a simple test. The next time you're around others, at a dinner table or anywhere else, take stock of the conversation. Actively pay attention to the dynamic. Calculate how long you are talking relative to how long others are. If you're the one with more food on their plate than everyone else, stop talking and let someone else share. Even if you're the best storyteller, everyone still wants to be heard. So, keep it short and don't overdo it.

Just be quiet … and listen.

Real-World Application

Erica was closing out a morning meeting which preceded the shift change at a hospital I had been working with for a few months. Over the last several weeks, her tone had hardened and her interest in entertaining input from her team was waning.

Echelon Front was brought in to help a chain of nearly a dozen hospitals. While the hospital system historically had done well, in recent years staff retention issues had developed, customer satisfaction surveys were headed in the wrong direction, and revenue was down.

Erica was the charge nurse. That meant she was responsible for scheduling, compliance, and making sure all the other nurses were doing their job well. She led a substantial staff who worked 24/7. Her team was split into three shifts of roughly ten nurses, with a lead for each shift. The teams covered the spectrum, ranging from old-guard nurses who'd been around for decades, seasoned veterans with several years' experience, and newbies just out of nursing school. According to Erica, all her lead nurses were high-quality and none needed a lot of supervision.

"Hey, Erica, how's morning shift looking today?" I asked, walking into the office behind the nurses' station.

"Fine. More of the same actually," she replied without much enthusiasm.

In the short time I had been there, I had found Erica to be a fiercely passionate nurse who'd entered health care to improve the lives of her patients. She had begrudgingly accepted a leadership role some years back, and now found herself with less direct contact with patients and more bureaucratic responsibilities. But she was also one of the most experienced nurses, knew the hospital inside out, and was well respected by the administration. She was an ideal person for the leadership position.

The other nurses on her team all felt the same passion she did. They loved their jobs, wanted nothing more than to help their patients, and had strong opinions about how the sick and injured should be cared for.

Lately, the shift change meetings had become less about patient details and more like complaint sessions. And Erica was getting tired of hearing everyone's opinions about everything that was wrong.

"I'm the charge nurse for a reason," Erica declared. "I have the most experience and have seen these problems more than anyone. Believe me, I get it."

"What are their complaints?" I asked.

"Mostly it's about the new IT system. It's supposed to be this 'all-in-one miracle system,' but they say it makes it harder to order labs, get test results, and send messages to other departments. The process to order supplies is too complex, and if they try to access their personal information, like vacation time and pay, it's overly complicated and the steps are hard to

follow," she said. "Last week, I had to listen for five minutes to someone complaining about how they can't even get towels in the bathroom without logging in to the computer. Some of the nurses have just shut down and won't even talk to me anymore," she went on. "And to make things worse, I've heard rumblings of more people thinking about quitting."

There were several hospitals in the vicinity in need of good staff that paid just as well, and some of the nurses were on the verge of leaving. In the last year, three had already gone.

It was clear that everyone involved felt pressure, especially Erica. Expectations were high to improve not only how patients received care but how hospital processes were implemented and streamlined, all thanks to a new CEO who understandably wanted to see higher efficiency and lower costs.

"I just need them to do their job," she lamented. "When all is said and done, they need to listen to what I'm telling them. And they're not."

Something she said struck me, so I asked a question, hoping not to push too hard. "When you're wanting them to listen to you, what exactly are you saying?"

Erica went into detail about how she expects them to be with patients, how they can be more efficient during rounds, how to report and communicate during shift changes. "And for what it's worth, I know what I'm saying is right," she concluded.

Two red flags instantly went up for me. I started with the most obvious issue.

"You telling them how to do their jobs has nothing to do with the IT problems they're having, does it?" I asked.

Erica wasn't sure what to say.

"Have you addressed any of those specific issues?" I went on.

Eventually, Erica answered. "Not exactly, no."

She was still trying to be a nurse, not a leader whose job it was to make the rest of the nurses' jobs easier. The nurses who worked for her didn't need her to constantly tell them how to do their job. They needed help eliminating administrative red tape so they could spend more time being the great nurses they already were.

Because they didn't feel heard, the nurses under Erica's charge were increasingly frustrated and started to resent Erica's constant bossing. Not unlike Whitney after my Ramadi return, they had lost their voice. They didn't feel listened to by Erica, which led to their complaining more vocally or, worse, shutting down altogether. As a result, nothing changed or got fixed, and relationships became strained.

"So, if their issues aren't being addressed, is it fair to say your nurses don't feel heard?" I asked.

A look of both recognition and uneasiness came over Erica's face.

"No … no they don't," she said. "I think I always assume that the more important part of the job is the interaction with patients and the rest we just have to get used to. But clearly the IT issues are important enough that it's making the rest of the job harder."

"Do you trust your nurses?" I asked.

"Implicitly," she said without hesitation.

"They're good at what they do?" I followed up.

"They're the best!" she replied enthusiastically.

I didn't have to say anything else.

"I haven't been really listening to what they've been saying. I've spent too much time talking about the wrong things."

Bingo.

But I still needed to address the second red flag.

"When you tell your nurses how to do their job and remind them that you're right, what do you think that costs you?" I asked.

From her squint and tilted head, I knew Erica didn't follow.

"There's a cost when you tell someone you're in a conversation with that you're right. Any idea what that might be?" I asked again.

Her deep exhale revealed that she got it. "I'm just shutting them down."

Bingo again.

I explained how being right can come at a cost. At Echelon Front, we teach a concept called leadership capital. It's like a bank account for a relationship. Even when we're right, if we're forcing our view onto someone, it hurts the relationship. It costs us leadership capital. If we do it enough, we can go bankrupt and drive the other person away. The more you

preach at your team, convinced that your way is the only way, the less you're going to get out of them.

"So, moving forward, do you think you'll employ a different approach?" I asked.

"I have to. The last thing I want is to lose one more good person." Erica seemed resolved to adjust her approach to how she led.

Three weeks later, during a return visit, we had a follow-up meeting. I asked Erica how things were going and if she found things to be any different.

"Honestly, it's incredible. I've pretty much kept my mouth shut when it comes to their day-to-day work, and have actually learned some things from them! And while I haven't been able to get everything changed with the new software, I did make some strides with the IT department about purchasing, which has made everyone's job easier."

Erica even seemed to be enjoying her job more. "So many of the nurses have found me in the office and thanked me. They feel better, I feel better, problems are getting solved, and they're complaining less!"

She was on the right path, and the turnaround was evident. It's astounding the difference it makes when we listen to what others are really saying, and how quickly change can then occur. By talking less, a good leader can better assess issues and can address problems more quickly and efficiently, whether in a hospital, in a Humvee, or at home.

A good leader knows when it's time to listen more and STOP TALKING.

8

CHANGE

Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida
F-22 Raptor training
March 2008

MY TANTRUM WAS EPIC. It rivaled that of a sleep-deprived toddler being told he can't have the toy he wants, only I added a stream of expletives that would make a sailor blush. In keeping with the tone of this book, and the fact that my children will likely read it, I'll let you fill in the blanks.

"What the _____ are you doing?"
"What the _____ is wrong with you?"
"How in the _____ is this happening?"
"What the _____ is going on?"
"Why the _____ is this so hard?"

After the first outbursts, I started thinking bigger.

"Why the _____ can't you do this?"
"How the _____ did you even get here?"
"How the _____ are you going to figure this out?"
"What the _____ are you going to do now?"

In the moment, I felt as though my brain might be disintegrating and I couldn't understand why. By the time I hit the ten-minute mark of the training, I had essentially given up on the mission and started my rant. To that point, nothing I tried to do worked.

And because I was inside a modern flight simulator, it was all on camera for my instructor, a relatively young Air Force captain, to watch. Out of shock, morbid curiosity, or perhaps sheer entertainment, he let me go on until I had gotten everything out of my system. Thank goodness Instagram didn't yet exist. Whatever it looked like from his point of view, the display couldn't have been flattering. There I was, in high definition, the first and only Marine ever to fly the world's deadliest fighter, completely losing it during a simulator training event. It was awful.

I was arguably one of the most experienced and well-trained fighter pilots in the world, certainly in Naval Aviation. I had nearly fourteen years of active-duty service. I had flown well over two thousand hours in the F/A-18 Hornet, earned every qualification available, and logged nearly four hundred "traps" (aircraft carrier landings) during combat deployments to both Iraq and Afghanistan. I had deployed as a ground FAC to the most violent city in the world, engaging in dozens of firefights in which I not only fired my personal weapon multiple times but also called in numerous air strikes employing every weapon carried by the Marine Corps' fixed wing and rotary fleet of aircraft. I had been in charge of TOPGUN, the world's most renowned flying school, where I trained hundreds of student pilots in preparation for war. I had already been qualified in the F-16 Fighting Falcon, another Air Force fighter with legendary capabilities. These were the jets the Thunderbirds flew, and they were faster and more powerful than anything I'd piloted before. My reputation was stellar after having completed, just two months earlier, my fifth deployment in ten years, most recently as the second in command of a Marine Corps fighter squadron.

Now I was in the seat of a pretend airplane behaving like a petulant child.

Like much of my career, the path to that flight simulator's seat seemed unlikely. The previous year, word had gotten around the Corps that it had agreed to a pilot exchange with the Air Force. In anticipation of the arrival of a newly designed aircraft, the F-35 Lightning, the Marines were preparing for their first new fighter in nearly thirty years. As the adoption of this new jet represented an entirely new generation of fighter, with a

capability not fully understood by anyone in Naval Aviation, there would be growing pains.

The leaders in charge of Marine Corps aviation sought to limit the inevitable friction and challenges sure to come with this new technology. So, they wisely looked to the Air Force, which had already negotiated the rocky terrain the Marines were just beginning to navigate. Not three years earlier, the USAF had introduced its own brand-new aircraft, also representing the now-emerging fifth generation of fighters, the F-22 Raptor. They had experienced all the missteps, conflicts, friction, resistance, and pitfalls of that transformational experience, into which the Marine Corps was marching headlong. The Corps figured they could leverage those lessons by training a pilot on the F-22, which was similar enough in its technology and purpose to the forthcoming Lightning. That pilot would master the new equipment, eventually bringing all his or her learned equity back to the Marines to lead the transition to the F-35.

It was a brilliant plan that would save countless hours of pain and cost associated with absorbing the nuance of a brand-new machine. It was also identified as a good deal of the highest order for the pilot fortunate enough to snag the assignment. Whoever was selected for this exchange would hold the distinction of being the only Marine to fly the jet every pilot in the world wanted to fly. The Raptor was far and away the best fighter aircraft ever built and the envy of everyone not assigned to it. It was a monster in every way, and everyone wanted a shot at it. Everyone.

To sweeten the deal for this lucky Marine, it was virtually guaranteed that once the tour flying the F-22 ended, there was another winning lottery ticket awaiting him or her. This pilot would almost surely be the commander of the first F-35 squadron, and would likely be the first operational pilot in the world to fly it. It would also make him or her the first and only pilot ever to be qualified in both of America’s brand-new fifth-generation fighters.

It wouldn’t be me.

Shortly after Ramadi, I had been accepted into Dartmouth College. An MBA from the prestigious Tuck School of Business was in my future and that transition out of the Corps had already started, with Whitney looking

for rentals in Hanover, New Hampshire, while I was overseas. My having already deferred my school admission to complete a final deployment in the F-18 six short months after my return from Iraq, it was time for something new. In my mind, I had done more than I ever dreamed of in my thirteen-plus years in the Corps. Having seen every aspect of aviation, from air and ground, I felt like there was nothing unique left for me to do. With that feeling in my gut, I knew it was time to get out of the military.

My bosses knew that deployment, which took me all over the Asia-Pacific region and far away from combat, was to be my last. I was flattered by their efforts to retain me, but remained unwavering in my commitment to leaving the Corps. My resistance was gracious, but I routinely joked that I would only stay if the Marines acquired Raptors, knowing they never would. Halfway through my final deployment and two months after I'd paid the nonrefundable deposit to Tuck, the official notification of the pending pilot loan program went public.

Unable to ignore the opportunity, however unlikely it was, I applied along with over 150 of my esteemed colleagues and friends. Whitney was supportive and all for it. She told me she'd be happy either way. I knew it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I could get my MBA anytime, and this exchange would only happen once.

About a month after I applied, I got the epic news that I'd been selected for the extraordinary assignment. Now I was all but assured that the next six years of my life were to be fighter-pilot nirvana. Within weeks of returning from what was to have been my farewell to the Corps, I merely tipped my hat to my first aviation love, the F-18 Hornet, and moved on to a bigger and better jet.

A brand-new generation of fighters, just beginning to emerge, was about to captivate me. Whitney and I packed up our lives and trekked more than two thousand miles to Tyndall Air Force Base, just outside Panama City, Florida. This was the home of the F-22 Raptor training squadron and would be where my life as a fifth-generation fighter pilot officially began.

Because I was already fully qualified in two other aircraft, I was placed in what was called the Transition/Conversion, or TX, course. It was how the Air Force trained every current F-22 pilot in their fleet who'd come from

some other jet in the service. It was a streamlined syllabus that spent very limited time on Air Force fighter fundamentals that everyone, except me, already knew. Its focus was just on learning the uniqueness of the F-22 itself, a relatively simple transition, at least on paper.

I was assigned to a class with five other USAF pilots, all of whom were previously certified in one of the Air Force's older fourth-generation fighters, none of which was the F-18. They were a stellar and experienced crew of some of the best pilots I have ever known, also hand-selected to convert to the F-22. I was going to lean on them heavily to learn how the Air Force did things, since the TX course itself wasn't intended to address any of that. Everyone else in the course already knew everything about a branch of military service that, to this point, was totally foreign to me.

Things started well. I was genuinely happy to be there and made quick friends with my classmates and instructors. My strong resume and reputation still humbled me, and I had no interest in making waves. The start of academics and ground school found me totally engrossed in the teachings of the highly complex F-22. It truly was a generational leap from anything I'd experienced in the F-18 or F-16. To be successful, I had to know the jet inside and out. I learned and understood every system, data point, fact, and process of that jet. I passed every exam. I displayed proficiency in the aircraft systems simulators, which tested my knowledge and my ability to handle emergencies and conduct basic navigation in the airplane.

Becoming an expert on how the machine worked came naturally to me; it was the third fighter training of my career. Learning about the most advanced and sophisticated jet ever built felt like I'd been given the keys to a top-secret supercar; I took to it with relish. And for the most part, flying is flying. There's nothing tactical about navigating from point A to point B. Most aviation rules are general, not specific to the military or the services. So, as long as I followed the basic guidelines I already knew, and learned all the details of the aircraft itself, the first phase of the TX course would be easy.

And it was. Before I knew it, I had passed my first F-22 check ride certifying me in the jet. Now came the good stuff, the tactical flying that

would demonstrate the real value of the F-22: how to employ it in combat. That was what the Corps wanted from me—a deep understanding of how to fight in a jet that was by all metrics very different from anything anyone had ever seen, save for the small F-22 community of which I was now a part.

It was a group populated mostly by former F-15 Eagle pilots. Though brilliant tacticians who had flown a fighter that will go down in history as one of the greatest ever built, Eagle pilots had been excluded from the wars that started after September 11, 2001. Their platform was only capable of fighting other aircraft. With no enemy aircraft to scrap with in either Iraq or Afghanistan, F-15 pilots were relegated to the sidelines.

I assumed that my heavy involvement in both those wars afforded me an advantage. I knew modern combat aviation as well as anyone in the world, certainly better than the group that was teaching me Raptor tactics. The pilots instructing me possessed less than half my experience. Only a handful of the F-22 teachers were former weapons school instructors. Few had experience in more than two fighters, even fewer had seen combat, and none had fought on the ground. By all measures I was more experienced and qualified than anyone teaching me. But they had deep knowledge of what it meant to be in the Air Force. On that point I was skunked.

Everything the Air Force did was different from what the Marines did. I mean that in a literal sense. Everything, down to the basic terminology they used, was different.

If the Marine Corps walks to the jet, the Air Force steps to the jet.

If the Marine Corps says two jets flying in formation a mile apart is combat spread, the Air Force says it’s line abreast.

If the Marine Corps says two jets flying right next to each other is parade formation, the Air Force says it’s close formation.

The list went on. It’s as if someone sat down, looked at the glossary of terms for Marine Aviation, and changed every single one for the Air Force, just to be different. I quickly learned to resent the differences, chalking them up to classic military silos and the pointless competition between the branches that served no real purpose other than magnifying their differences and entrenching each in their own way of operating.

In the beginning of my F-22 training, I accepted those nuanced differences, because they didn't matter. I happily conformed, doing things "their way." But as my training progressed, I observed differences in much more critical areas of training, like how to employ the jet. And I resisted them.

My instinct was to listen to my less experienced Air Force instructors and then dismiss what they said. If it was different from how I understood it, I was inclined to reject it. The mantra I came to adopt early in my tactical training was to learn how they do it, then fly it like a Hornet. No way was I going to change for change's sake, directed by a younger captain who had never been shot at.

I didn't get here by accident, I told myself. I had a decade-long track record of being really good in a jet. Flying, to me, was like breathing. What I had done worked well enough to thrive in both the F-18 and F-16, and I saw no reason to change now, at least not substantially.

That obstinate resistance to change followed me to the seat of a simulator, where I was unable to complete basic tasks in the introductory tactical syllabus. Within days of learning how the Raptor should fight, I had become totally lost. It was at the same time humiliating and frustrating.

Cue my expletive-laced outburst.

Anger, confusion, embarrassment—I felt inept as a flood of emotions overcame me. And I felt completely exposed in front of a pilot ten years my junior, with no combat experience and a fraction of my flight time. Some advantage.

It turned out that all the things I thought were strengths were actually problems for me. Almost all the habits I had formed in my previous jets were now liabilities in a machine that required a whole new way of thinking. They were barriers to overcome, rather than instincts on which to rely.

Thankfully, my meltdown was met with sympathy. My instructor was unfailingly patient. I genuinely think he felt bad for me. After watching me lose my cool trying to grasp new concepts for employing a jet in war, he was considerate enough to pause the training and simply let me vent. Perhaps he could recall his own tough transition to the Raptor and

appreciated how much worse it had to be for me as the lone Marine. Or maybe I provided some much-needed comic relief during a stressful day. Either way, he let me flail in the kindest way possible.

"You good, sir?" he asked delicately.

"Yeah." I exhaled deeply and rubbed my hands over my face. "I'm sorry, man, I'm just lost."

"I know, and I get it. I was lost, too. Though maybe not as much as you," he joked, eliciting a chuckle from me. "But seriously, we all know this must be a lot for you to absorb. Everything is different. Worst of all, you've got me telling you that what you're doing, what you've been doing for ten years, is wrong."

He genuinely understood and knew what I was dealing with. And after a brief moment, I felt enough resignation about my failure to be willing to hear what he had to say, despite my instinct to see him as inferior.

So, we stopped the simulator, and I sheepishly followed him to a small briefing room to talk. If I was going to be relevant and contribute the way the Corps expected, I needed help. If I had a chance at succeeding, something had to change. *I* had to change.

Most of what makes the F-22 unique remains classified. I can't talk about the majority of its capabilities. But there are a few ways to describe the challenges I faced without giving away the details. First, the missions assigned to the Raptor were unlike anything I had ever seen. The F-22 was built to operate in Anti-Access/Area Denial, or A2/AD, scenarios. That meant that how to get to and from a combat zone, and what to do once in it, were completely unlike anything I had ever experienced.

Second, it is a stealth jet and very hard to see. In the fighters of the previous generation, like the F-18, everyone can see you. And you know that from the onset, so you don't spend any time trying to conceal yourself from enemy radar. The exact opposite is true in a fifth-generation fighter, where your concealment is paramount.

Maintaining stealth, especially in the A2/AD world, is so important that it changes virtually everything you do. When to turn, how to turn, where to point, where to fly, when to maneuver, when to shoot, when to defend are

all different. Therefore, the habits I had developed, which made me so effective in my previous jets, were now all incorrect.

My instructor attempted to help me see the need to abandon my old way of doing things. The change seemed daunting and overwhelming as I contemplated how many habits I had to undo. Hence, my meltdown in the simulator. I felt it would have been better to start with a clean slate in the F-22 than try to change a lifetime of instincts I had developed flying old jets.

Ironically, the Air Force came to the same conclusion. During my stint at Tyndall, the first class of F-22 students who came straight from flight school had started training on the F-22. They were labeled B course students rather than TX course students. They had never been qualified in any other tactical jet and weren't transitioning from another platform. While green and inexperienced, they brought with them no bad habits, no preconceived notions, and no irrational commitment to how they had been doing things. They were open to change, because they had nothing to change from.

With my ego firmly in check, I reached out to the class of B coursers, a group of four young men who looked barely old enough to drive, and asked them for help. When I walked up to one of them for the first time, he looked around as if he were getting pranked on a hidden-camera show. It was clear no one had ever asked for his opinions about toothpaste, much less how he felt about Raptor tactics. But as I pressed, he quickly opened up and talked me through the logic he was developing with this jet that was new to both of us.

He proved to be a great communicator and helped me understand why he was doing the things he was doing. It felt like he was shining a light on a dark road he had already traveled, pointing out turns I couldn't see on my own. It helped immensely. Without hesitation, I'd changed the things I did in that jet because of the input of someone with less than a tenth of my experience. Not only did it help me comprehend more of what I had to do, it made the process of changing deep-seated habits easier.

Suddenly, I found myself listening to and learning from people who were younger and younger, and less and less experienced. To my surprise

and delight, it helped. Embracing the change came quickly, in part, because the results presented themselves immediately.

My performance in tactical training improved dramatically as I demonstrated the ability to execute maneuvers that made the F-22 so lethal. But more important to my long-term success, the habit of trying new things, the practice of change, became entrenched. With an open-minded approach, and my willingness to be flexible, I saw the value of change not only in the F-22 but in all aspects of my life.

My Tyndall training came and went quickly, and by no means did I learn everything there was to know about the Raptor. In fact, most of my education would come in my permanent assignment at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Nevada. As a member of the 422nd Test and Evaluation Squadron, my job entailed testing new ways of operating the Raptor. I was tasked with making constant changes to how the jet was employed in order to make it even more lethal.

No one would ever accuse me of being the best F-22 pilot to ever fly it, and I never achieved expertise in any of its missions. But I thrived in my Air Force exchange, which was punctuated by the significant differences from what I had learned with the Marine Corps and Navy. And the lessons that young pilot taught me informed how I passed along my newfound knowledge to my new squadron.

I was eventually selected as the commander of the F-22 division at Nellis, an unheard-of opportunity for a Marine, but one which I took seriously and for which I will be forever thankful. Things had come full circle, as I was now leading a crop of newly transitioned Raptor pilots still struggling with change.

Fortunately for them, I was an expert in one thing—understanding how hard the transition to the Raptor could be even for an experienced pilot. Helping my team embrace the change, stay open-minded to new things, and listen to even the most junior pilots in the squadron was the peak of my leadership responsibilities. Of all the lessons the Marine Corps needed to manage, the change precipitated by the arrival of the F-35 proved to be by far the most important.

LESSON: We resist change, but we shouldn’t

THE MINDSETS FOR VICTORY

Discipline = Freedom
Default: Aggressive
Innovate and Adapt
Humility
Extreme Ownership

Change is vital to the success of people, teams, and organizations. A team’s ability to be flexible and respond to a dynamic environment proves critical to success. If you interview any thriving company, they will tell you how important change is to the survival of their organization. At Echelon Front, we teach a concept called Innovate and Adapt in the foundational leadership brief we present to all our clients. Just as the name suggests, it is about change. We consider embracing change a vital mindset for any good leader, and when teaching it, we often ask simple questions.

“What happens to companies that don’t innovate and adapt over time?”

“What happens to people when they refuse to change?”

In almost every case, the audience knows the answer. Companies that don’t change collapse, just as people who don’t change are doomed to fail. Virtually everyone knows the need for change if something is to grow.

Yet, even with the knowledge that change is vital, as individuals we are naturally resistant to it. Simply put, we don’t like it. In fact, often the only people who do like change are the ones who impose it on other people. It is in our human nature to oppose change, even when we objectively understand that it is in our best interest.

We have an aversion because change is uncomfortable and unpredictable. It causes friction, stress, and oftentimes, inefficiency in the short term. There’s usually a tough transition period, where we are uncertain whether these changes will work out for the best. Maybe you’ve been thinking about transforming your operations, ending a relationship, or

switching up the team, but you haven't followed through. Often, we are so resistant to adjustments that we end up in a bad situation that we were aware could occur and could have prevented. We ignore warning signs on the road ahead because we're afraid of unknown roadblocks if we change our course.

But this tendency to resist demonstrates how desperately we need help to "Innovate and Adapt." Like all the leadership principles we teach at Echelon Front, change is simple but not easy. While understanding the need for change is simple, putting it into action is much more difficult. That's why it is a rare, yet vital, behavior for any good leader. Good leaders embrace change and teach their teams to do the same.

How can you adopt this behavior and help your team lead through periods of changes?

Humility and listening are directly connected to embracing change. Much like the chapters and topics in this book, all the leadership behaviors and mindsets are related. You must be humble enough to listen and accept where changes need to be made. You must listen to learn. You have to subordinate your ego and ask your team members for their input and ideas. When you keep an open mind, you target and confront your resistance to change. But that's only the tactical part of the equation.

To succeed, a good leader must fully and strategically implement change. Yet, it is in the implementation where the challenge lies. Even under the best of circumstances—with a humble mindset and the willingness to actively listen to the people around you—change doesn't come easy. Often it proves too difficult for many leaders, especially those with long track records of success built upon a way of doing things that has worked throughout their life.

It is often easiest to change when a team struggles or fails. Months or years of poor performance, not meeting projections, operating over budget, and missing quality standards are all obvious indicators that something needs to be done. This type of retroactive change is necessary but often comes too late. Especially in a time of hypercompetitive business, the later a team implements change, the less likely it will help. That's why we must be ready to change, even when we are most resistant to it.

But change can be difficult even when the team is winning. This is when complacency rears its ugly head. Months or years of solid performance, exceeding projections, operating under budget, and consistently meeting quality standards are all obvious indicators that what you're doing works. Those indicators can lead people and teams to the "That's how we've always done it around here" and "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" tropes and solidify behaviors. This pattern of success convinces businesses that change is not necessary, at least not for them. But even when you are winning, you should be on the lookout for opportunities to adapt. By being flexible and responsive to these signals, you will stay ahead of the competition and on a steady path to improvement.

Change for change's sake, however, does not work. You have to be strategic with timing, reasoning, and movement. If you're making shifts in personnel or taking wide-sweeping actions without data, logic, reason, and intent, you're likely not going to help your organization. Not everything needs to change. Meaningful core values, products and services of genuine value, and well-defined attributes and behaviors are all elements of a culture that can sustain a company and strengthen teams. They do not necessarily require change over time. But people and companies must remain open-minded and willing to embrace change whenever the need does arise.

The constant willingness to evolve and lead a team through change is what guarantees a leader long-term success. A good leader knows that the need to innovate and adapt never goes away.

Embrace change, and teach your team to do the same, no matter the circumstances.

Real-World Application

"It really is how we've always done it," Brent said. That timeworn phrase was quickly followed by, "And I know how that sounds."

He nearly winced at his own comment. At least he knew.

Brent's being a client of Echelon Front, I knew he had heard the concept of Innovate and Adapt before. But something was getting in the way.

As the CEO of a small marketing firm focused on footwear and athletic insoles, Brent had built a successful company that had experienced significant growth over the previous twenty-four months. His firm was able to recruit some of the highest-quality talent in the industry largely because of his reputation as a humble and likable leader. Word of mouth was key in his relatively small world, and as a firm believer in investing in his people, he brought Echelon Front in to conduct long-term training with his entire workforce.

With our initial OBA complete, our preliminary interactions revealed what Brent and his chief people officer (CPO), Stella, had already noticed: The newest crop of the most junior employees seemed disengaged, with the telltale sign coming from a poor response around one statement we present:

"I am empowered to take aggressive actions that will benefit my organization."

Universally, that question was met with a negative response and the company delivered the lowest score of any question asked on the survey.

A fresh round of hiring less than six months old hadn't yielded the results upper management expected. With the loss of one recent hire and impending loss of a second, trouble was brewing, and the most senior leaders saw it.

"So, why are you saying it?" I asked Brent as I glanced over at Stella to include her in the discussion.

"Honestly, because we don't know what to do," Stella replied while Brent nodded begrudgingly. "We're losing people and we're not delivering. But we don't know why."

They were in an unfamiliar spot. Not only were they at risk of losing a second hire, their most recent campaign for one of their clients hadn't performed well.

"This sounds like a bit of a one-two punch," I said.

"Exactly," they said in unison.

Brent, Stella, and the entire executive leadership team were all highly qualified. They each had more than fifteen years of experience in marketing, and nearly all had been with this company for at least seven

years. They had witnessed firsthand, and helped create, the dramatic growth that recently occurred.

But now that their new employees had been here for nearly two years, frustration was starting to rear its head.

The executive team held weekly meetings with all lower-level supervisors and managers to run through performance numbers, key client updates, and new project initiatives. Those meetings were run by Brent, who gave a high-level overview, then allowed time for each of the other executives to update the room on their particular vertical and bring new ideas to the table.

I watched as everyone sat there during the brief. Then, at the end, Brent asked if there were any questions. Aside from a suggestion or two, most of the team simply slouched in their chairs, disengaged.

Something wasn't right. When it came to the project initiatives, there should have been banter, the throwing around of ideas, and the type of spirited discussion I had come to expect from marketing pros, who loved to spitball ideas. But there was none of that.

So I pressed Stella about why the scene was so muted.

She alluded to a recent argument regarding a new marketing campaign for a client.

"What was the argument about?" I asked.

"One of our new marketing directors proposed a radically new campaign strategy for a product release in one targeted market," she said.

She went on to explain that the idea was shot down by the chief marketing officer (CMO), who directed the team to use the current template. "It works" was his curt rationalization.

The marketing director who'd suggested the regional marketing strategy did her best to explain that her proposal might be different but that it was likely to be more effective. The more precisely you can target a campaign, the more you can elicit a direct hit with actual customers, even though you may reach fewer people, she explained.

The CMO's reaction was his version of my F-22 training fiasco. Flustered by inflexibility and lack of understanding, the CMO argued with

the marketing director and ultimately shut down the idea wholesale, concluding with the “That’s how we have always done it” edict.

“These new hires don’t know a thing about the industry. They’re just too new,” Brent said in defense of his CMO.

Stella explained that the marketing department was foundationally solid, but they were somewhat resistant to input from newer team members. Executives, including the CMO, were mostly older and highly experienced people with a long history of success. They were never easily swayed.

I thought about another way to approach the issue.

“What’s happened in the industry over the past several years? Has it stayed the same?” I asked.

“Not at all. The past two years alone have seen massive change,” Stella said.

“So, as an industry you’re seeing shifts that are new to not just the new employees but to the older executives, too?” I continued to probe.

Brent admitted that they weren’t as familiar with some of the directions the industry was headed. And he could see how that could lead to new staff members feeling frustration. And while some of the new guard were happy to do nothing, the most vocal knew there were changes that had to be made for the company to thrive. Those were the ones ready to jump ship.

“And those are the ones you most likely want to keep,” I added. “Can I ask what new directions they were considering?”

Stella went into detail about how newly accessible artificial intelligence applications like ChatGPT could develop and write ads almost instantly. But there was reluctance by the executives to use it because they didn’t understand it or thought a computer didn’t possess the deep knowledge of their products that they did. Stella admitted that many of the company’s older employees weren’t active on social media sites, so those tools were marginalized or ignored, despite the obvious benefit of the virtually free advertising that had the potential to reach millions of potential consumers.

“Young customers,” I added.

“And there are so many new privacy rules for smartphones and search engines, which means access to clients has changed. It’s much harder to gather their info than in years past,” she lamented.

“So how are you doing it? What’s the required change to collect that critical info and reach those customers?” I continued to probe, hoping they’d both hear how closed-minded they sounded by saying it out loud.

“We’re still writing copy manually. There’s a long process for ad approval. So that means we’re sometimes behind in getting things out. We’re definitely losing the social media battle, where content matters more these days. People aren’t watching television or reading magazines the way they used to.” Then Stella had a light-bulb moment. “Oh my gosh, Brent, we sound like dinosaurs.”

We all had a laugh, but the nugget of her statement rang true. The executives had been resistant to change because their previous experience had worked, and that previous success, along with a healthy dose of fear, had built up a resistance to change.

But Brent still seemed confused about how to move forward. “We can’t just abandon the techniques and approaches that have worked for so long. These are tried-and-true methods which have sustained the business for decades. I’ve experienced plenty of trends in my career, and even with all the things I’ve seen change in the world, what we’ve done has worked.”

“So, why did you call us in?” I asked, pointedly.

Brent took an introspective moment before admitting that numbers were starting to drop. Growth fell below expectations last quarter, and the entire company was starting to suffer. If things were left unaddressed, he knew, that trajectory posed genuine risk to the long-term plans they had for expansion and revenue.

“What do the new folks know that you don’t?” I asked, a little more softly.

“They definitely know the new technologies, new ways to target a more niche customer, which is what we desperately need, and they seem to know a shorthand for a new audience’s language. But they’re raw,” Brent said.

“You’re absolutely right—they are raw. And they have so much to learn. But let’s think about why you hired them. What were you looking for? Do you want them just replicating your work, or do you want their input so the company, and you, can genuinely evolve?”

It didn’t take long for Brent to come around to where Stella already was. “Of course we want to evolve. We need to start listening to their ideas,” Brent said.

“That’s fine, but it’s not exactly where I’m going with this,” I explained.

Brent looked bewildered, but Stella understood.

“It’s more than that.” Stella turned to Brent. “We have to do what they’re saying. Actually do it. We have to really understand why they’re making those suggestions. I think we’re saying no because we don’t understand, not just because we disagree. And if we don’t understand what they’re talking about, we need to ask them to teach us. We have to take a leap of faith in the people we’ve hired and start to change some of the ways we operate.”

Stella got it. Listening wasn’t the only or the biggest issue here. The problem was that no one was changing, and the barrier was not understanding why it was so important. The youngest people at the firm understood things the most experienced executives didn’t. It was a scenario Brent, Stella, and the CMO couldn’t wrap their heads around. Past experience and success weren’t going to deliver. Too many things were changing, and they needed to do the same.

“Look what happened to Aaron Gelso’s firm.” Stella shuddered at the thought. The Gelso firm had been the eight-hundred-pound gorilla of print media for local sporting goods stores, but had failed to diversify into other marketing channels, including online, and had recently folded. “Yeah,” Brent mused, “we can’t afford to get stuck in our ways, even if everything looks fine now.”

Thankfully, there were solutions to the problems they faced. It was just that those solutions came from the most inexperienced members of the team, who were also the ones most willing to embrace change. It was a total paradigm shift for a group accustomed to doing things the way they always had. Eventually that was going to kill them.

Stella and Brent saw the path the company needed to take.

Adapt or die.

9

PUT THE TEAM FIRST

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Sea of Japan
23 miles behind the carrier
February 2000
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“NINETY-NINE, TAXI LIGHTS ON.”

My stomach immediately turned inside out. If another carrier pilot is reading this, they get it, because “ninety-nine, taxi lights on” is possibly the most dreaded call in all of Naval Aviation.

On the ship, radio calls are normally preceded by your aircraft number, and the information that is communicated after that number applies only to you.

“203, you’re cleared to climb to four thousand feet.”

“107, descend and maintain twelve hundred feet.”

Other pilots may hear the call directed at you, but if they don’t hear their aircraft number it’s just background information for them and not paid much heed.

When a radio call is preceded by “ninety-nine,” however, it means the information about to be transmitted applies to everyone. It’s an efficient way to share critical information needed by all airborne jets to coordinate their recovery back to the ship.

“Ninety-nine, the carrier is in a turn.”

“Ninety-nine, expected final bearing is three five zero degrees.”

Everyone pays attention to typical ninety-nine calls, but no one gets nauseated.

“Ninety-nine, taxi lights on,” however, has the same effect on the stomach as week-old sushi. It’s not a call that helps anyone do any coordinating or adjusting. It just tells everyone that the weather is bad. End-of-days, apocalyptic bad. So bad that the LSOs won’t be able to see the normal lights of the jets trying to come aboard. It also means the rest of the flight is going to twist your insides into the shape of a pretzel. It’s hard enough having to land aboard the ship at night. After “ninety-nine, taxi lights on” that task escalates to DEFCON 1.

Normally, the small lights installed on all airplanes to help identify their orientation at night are visible for miles. You learn to use the light positions in flight school. The right wingtip is green, the left wingtip is red, and the top of the tail is white. Therefore, a plane flying toward you will have a different light pattern from the one flying away from you. It’s elemental to figure out with a little experience. Especially when it’s dark out, aircraft lighting is generally easy to see.

At night, the LSOs use that lighting system to frame the incoming aircraft and assess its altitude, position, wing movement, and nose adjustments. LSOs are well trained on the lighting configurations for all the different aircraft that fly at the ship and become experts at using just the lights on the wings and tail to evaluate the landing progress and ensure a safe recovery. Even in some of the worst weather, those lights can usually be seen at the three-quarter-mile point, where the LSO visually takes over from Air Traffic Control and guides the planes in on their final eighteen seconds of the landing.

On this particular night, the LSOs couldn’t see anything, so the call was made for all planes to activate their taxi light. That light sits on the strut of the nose landing gear and is intended to help a pilot see the runway and taxiway in the dark at a regular airport, like the headlight on a car. It’s an oversized and insanely powerful light that is typically visible for ten miles or more. These are the lights you see in the night sky around an airport as the jets line up to land. Around the carrier, the light would be so bright that it would blind everyone on the ship, and the pilot as he or she got close to the landing area. You never have the taxi light on around the ship.

Well, not never. But hardly ever. Except when you hear the dreaded “ninety-nine, taxi lights on” call.

A dozen planes remained in the sky that night, including mine, and we were just told that that light was the only way our jets could be seen through fog so thick you could barely see your hand in front of your face.

Safely out of the fog, the rest of the pilots not out on a mission that night were tucked into the “ready room.” The ready room is a home away from home for the pilots and officers of a deployed fighter squadron. A blend of office space, movie theater, dive bar, and living room, it’s the spot where pilots chill out, socialize, hold meetings, pass time, and receive briefings. Every squadron has one. An old-school tube TV hung in the corner of our ready room. That antiquated box had a few channels, but only two that were useful.

One was for the weather. Unlike today’s iteration with sophisticated digital animations and high-end graphics, this weather channel simply displayed text indicating the height of the clouds, visibility in miles, and any precipitation to be expected. It was written in an aviation shorthand all pilots understood. That night, it forecast deteriorating conditions the later into the evening we got. I knew I could count on some light rain, low clouds around five hundred feet, and reduced visibility of a mile or two around my expected land time. Sketchy, but not *The Perfect Storm* bad.

Since there would be no moon to speak of, it didn’t necessarily matter that there wouldn’t be much to see. Yes, landing on the carrier at night is stressful, even for the most experienced pilots. As for me, a novice with barely twenty-five night landings to my name, I was already panicked. So, the weather didn’t do much more damage to my already heightened state.

The other useful TV channel, sadly not HBO, was called the PLAT. The Pilot Landing Aid Television is a live video feed from a camera located in the middle of the landing area. It sits flush with the flight deck right on the centerline and films every landing aboard the ship in the event of a mishap, problem, or something that needs to be reviewed. It’s on all the time and is as addictive to a carrier pilot as TikTok is to a fourteen-year-old with a new iPhone.

There’s a nickname around the ship for the PLAT—Danger TV. Most of the time landings aboard the carrier look routine. A ship at sea can log well over ten thousand landings during a standard six-month deployment. Despite how hard it is, Naval Aviation makes arrested landings look easy. Most of the time.

But a few times on every cruise, Mother Nature grows cranky and things can get pretty sketchy coming aboard. With the ship pitching and rocking due to the heavy swells caused by bad weather, staying on the glide path can be tough for a pilot. Major power and lineup changes appear dramatic on the PLAT and solicit whoops, hollers, gasps, and OMGs from viewers wondering if they’re about to witness a mishap. Hence the name: Danger TV. Everyone who’s not airborne has a good time watching the dozen or so hapless pilots stuck overhead trying to get aboard. Prime-time PLAT watching usually involves popcorn, (nonalcoholic) beverages, and betting. And it can get morbid. Often someone will write down the names of the pilots who are in the current recovery on a whiteboard. Then bets are made as to what might happen during their pass in the bad weather. It always draws a raucous crowd.

Predictions of bolters are standard for the new guys. Veterans typically get bets of “Fair” or “OK.” And of course, on particularly tough nights, the most irreverent of pilots safely on the boat will make a borderline inappropriate prediction—mostly to get a rise out of the crowd. “Chip is gonna get a bloodcurdling wave-off from the LSO in close and barely clear the ramp” is an example of a typical prediction about a scared new guy about to attempt the hardest carrier landing of his life. In the end, everyone is genuinely praying for the safe recovery of each pilot, especially your squadron mates. But gallows humor reigns on the carrier when the weather and sea turn against you.

The pilots who are briefing their flights in the ready room do their best to ignore the background shenanigans as they plan their mission, but the caterwauling can be hard to ignore. For me, it only added to the misery of a flight I already didn’t want to be on. Even in good conditions, I hated night traps. I mean, I HATED them. My beginner status added to my contempt, but I never really got over them. Most carrier pilots, even the combat

veterans, would agree that night traps create memories of their worst experiences in a jet.

I walked to every night mission with a foreboding sense of dread. My flight boots always felt as though they were concrete blocks. Early in my career, I secretly hoped my jet would have some mechanical or software failure that would "unfortunately" prevent me from taking off. The double-edged sword of being in VMFA-314 meant I flew the newest jets in the fleet, with the best system and the most modern technology, which worked, all the time. Despite my many pleas to the Almighty, I never once in my time at sea ever had to cancel a night launch for a maintenance problem. Funny that I'd worked so hard for so long, was so determined this would be my dream job, and yet there were times I'd wished I was anywhere but there.

On the PLAT that night, during my brief I noticed that jets were appearing on the screen later than normal and their lights were a little harder to see. It was expected for the weather forecast, but those hazy lights stayed with me like a premonition as I prepped.

As I walked up to the flight deck and headed toward my jet, the air felt odd, almost milky. My muscles tensed as I walked toward the fantail where my jet was parked—the same spot Maverick's F-14 Tomcat was parked when he strode contemplatively to the dogfight of his life in the *Top Gun* finale. The flight deck was dark and eerily quiet with no jets running. All I felt was a wet cold … and anxiety. Clouds thick as cotton candy curled around the plane as I preflighted in the dark.

My desire for something to break and sideline my flight evaporated as my trusty Hornet was up and ready within minutes of starting her. Looking skyward, I couldn't see a thing. I could barely make out the front of the carrier. But I was too busy with the task at hand to fabricate any doom-and-gloom scenarios as I taxied from the rear of the ship toward the catapult. I would be the first fighter to launch in my group that night.

The catapult stroke—the distance it takes to launch a jet from a carrier—is around three hundred feet, about the height of the Statue of Liberty. That's all the steam-propelled catapult needs to accelerate a jet to full speed and force it into the air. In the daytime, it's unequivocal fun. It's what

getting shot out of a cannon must feel like, and the rush from and sensation of the acceleration begs repeating like a bad habit. Imagine a roller coaster but with no safety rails. There's nothing in everyday life that can replicate the exhilarating experience of a cat shot. During the day.

The nighttime? Not so much. While it sounds and feels the same, getting launched into a dark void is unnerving. It's a little like Disney World's Space Mountain. You can't see anything, but you feel everything. And it's impossible to maintain your bearings. Like I said, unnerving. As you anticipate the start of the stroke, your heart races and your nerves fray just a bit as you consider the potential of something going wrong. There's an initial thrust and you're slammed back into your seat, BANG, then silence as you are hurled into the black.

That night, as the others before it, I reluctantly embraced the nothingness I had entered and focused on my head-up display (HUD). The HUD is a digital display installed on the dashboard of a fighter that sits directly in front of the pilot's face and contains all pertinent flight instruments. Priority one was to analyze my HUD's altitude readout and ensure I was safely climbing. I then raised my landing gear and flaps, knowing the sixty feet of buffer between me and the water could be closed in less than a second if I pushed the nose over, the natural tendency after a night cat shot.

The fluid in your inner ear gets fully discombobulated during the acceleration of the violent cat launch. Without the visual cues you'd have during the day to provide perspective, your body feels like it's falling backward. As the brain attempts to compensate for the sensation, it tries to coax you into pushing forward on the control stick to straighten things out. That vertigo has been powerful enough to convince many pilots to fly their perfectly climbing plane directly down into the water, obliterating both plane and pilot. So, I did what I was taught and ignored the disorientation and compulsion to push forward, and safely climbed up and straight until I was above the clouds.

I have very little memory of the actual training mission I conducted that night. But it went off without a hitch and before I knew it, I was headed back in the stack.

The stack is where the jets are sent up to prepare for their recovery. Night recoveries are procedure-heavy, intricate, and must be executed meticulously. With little margin for error, the interaction between the ship and the pilots is a well-choreographed performance. LSOs, the Air Traffic Controller Center, and the ship's navigator all collaborate to set up the recovery. Each jet is assigned a discrete altitude and distance from the ship to mitigate the risk of a midair collision during the approach to landing. Jets are placed a thousand feet apart, one on top of the other, at ever-increasing distances from the ship. The stack.

It was in the stack that I first got the sense that something was, well, different. I established my jet at the assigned altitude, speed, and distance and set up the customary ten-mile left-hand oval racetrack pattern as I awaited my turn to return. Once I was settled, I engaged the autopilot and started to do what I always did before night landings: overthink.

That's when I noticed something out of the ordinary behind my HUD. A substance which seemed to be glowing was building up on my front windshield where the glass meets the fuselage. After a while, small beams of light, like tracers, raced up and over the canopy above my head. It took me a few minutes to figure it out. It was snow piling up in the small groove where the canopy and fuselage mate. As the pile grew bigger, it climbed up the windscreen and pieces would fly off in streaks up the glass.

Not a minute after I comprehended what was happening, I heard the "ninety-nine, taxi lights on" call. The full scope of the situation back at the ship became real. We were in the middle of a snowstorm that was so heavy, the first plane on approach to the ship was invisible to the LSOs when it was directed to climb up and try again only fifteen hundred feet away. Then it dawned on me.

The LSOs couldn't see the planes.

And that meant I wouldn't be able to see the carrier. So, the incredibly bright taxi light, normally off, was directed on with the hope the LSO could use it as a reference to assess the jet's position on the glideslope.

"I don't want to do this," I said out loud in the cockpit, feeling sick.

There's an old saying in aviation which I had heard but never fully understood, until that moment: It's better to be on the ground wishing you

were in the air than in the air wishing you were on the ground. The full weight of that axiom crushed me like an elephant as I toggled my taxi light on, in the stack, twenty-three miles behind the ship, eight thousand feet over the Sea of Japan, hundreds of miles from the nearest land, in a snowstorm, low on gas, at two in the morning, alone.

I begrudgingly dropped the Hornet's nose to begin my descent into God only knew what.

With very little experience on which to rely, I had to muster the nerve to bring my Hornet back aboard. I had never landed in anything close to those conditions and, as it turned out, it was one of only two zero-visibility landings I would ever attempt in my twenty-three-year career. All I had at that stage was my training and the rest of the equally nervous personnel aboard the Super Carrier *John C. Stennis*, all working together to recover the half a billion dollars' worth of jets and the dozens of lives eager to come back aboard.

I followed the procedures out of the stack to the letter. There were no issues running through the checklist that would align me directly behind the carrier at twelve hundred feet over the water. Once I settled at that altitude, all I had to do was drive toward the ship and wait for my descent point. That's when I noticed the pain. I had been squeezing the flight controls so hard my hands began to ache and the tension in my back made my neck stiffen.

At the three-mile mark, I began my final descent toward the ship. Normally, by this point, I would have seen all the visual cues on the carrier to validate my alignment and confirm I was set up for a good final approach. Not tonight. There was nothing to see but flashes of snow, my HUD, and the glow of my taxi light shining up from the nose of my jet reminding me of how deep in the weeds we all were.

My eyes never left my instrument readouts. I was so paranoid I would get off course or altitude and make a fatal mistake. While I dropped through 450 feet, a shrieking "Whoop, whoop" blared in my headset as my jet notified me of my descent through my final altitude check. Normally I would have anticipated the startling alert, a sign I was mentally focused,

and toggled it off right as it sounded. But I was so overwhelmed, it completely caught me off guard.

Next was the call from Air Traffic Control. “203, on course on glideslope, three-quarters of a mile, call the ball.”

“203, Clara,” I replied, trying to hide any trembling in my voice. “Clara” is the term used to inform the LSOs I didn’t see the ball. Or the ship. Or, on this night, anything.

“203, keep it coming,” they directed.

Damn. They didn’t see me, either.

I continued to fly the instruments, having never been this close to the ship without seeing it.

“203, paddles contact.” They finally saw me.

“Right for lineup, POWEEER!”

My response was pure reflex as I shoved the throttles forward. Not all the way, but just enough for a good shot of thrust, trying to give the LSO what he wanted … BAM! Tuuuuuug.

Wait, what?

Holy crap, I was aboard. And I never saw a thing.

While I was still processing what had just happened, a taxi director ran toward me waving yellow flashlights in front of my jet to hustle me out of the landing area. The next jet was less than a minute away and they needed me clear. I was still in shock as I positioned my jet off to the side of the landing area and was directed toward my parking spot.

I spun a 180-degree turn and was maneuvered to shut down to the right side of the landing area facing backward. Then the next jet in the stack rolled to a stop. I barely saw it, except for the taxi light.

How were the LSOs doing this?

As I was locked into position by the ground crew, I was now free to begin my shutdown checklist. Right in front of me, jet after jet plowed aboard the ship, barely visible. My body started to involuntarily respond to the stress. My legs began to shake so badly there was no way they would carry me out of the jet and down the ladder. My checklist would have to wait for a few minutes for the spasms to subside.

So, I sat there, watching the rest of the recovery, awestruck as every plane made it down safely in fog so thick it would have made a good base for soup. About fifteen minutes later, everyone was back safely. My legs shook the entire time.

Finally, I shut down my jet, got out, and made my way back to the ready room. Everyone watching Danger TV had eyes the size of saucers. What they'd watched was nothing short of a miracle.

When I was asked what it had felt like, I had no good answer. "I don't know what happened. I didn't see jack squat. I just got a lineup and a power call, then I was aboard."

It was undeniably exhilarating, an adrenaline rush of epic proportions—classic Naval Aviation. This story would rival some of the toughest and scariest landings ever made at the ship. And it was now mine to share. That euphoric feeling that I'd lived to describe got stronger after a round of handshakes from my squadron mates and CO, all of whom congratulated me on an incredible job. I relished it, feeling like I had done the impossible. But the euphoria didn't last.

Back in my room, something felt wrong—I felt like a fraud. Everyone was telling me what a great job I did, but I kept thinking that I didn't really do anything. The sensation of being tugged to a stop in the wires without knowing how I got there was the only thought rattling around in my head. All I did was follow procedures, listen to the commands, respond to two LSO calls, and obey the instructions of the ground crew once I landed. Otherwise, I was a passenger in my own jet.

None of what transpired that night happened because I was some ace pilot, or because I'd single-handedly problem-solved some untenable situation. I was getting all this recognition for being the person who'd done the least work. Instead of drifting off feeling like a legend, I tossed and turned all night.

The next morning, the violent sounds of the catapult stroke stirred me out of an already restless sleep. My room sat directly underneath the flight deck, right next to the second catapult, and the sounds of the day's first launch were too loud for anyone to sleep through. Being off the flight schedule afforded me time to sort through my unexpected reaction to the

events of the night before. I needed to understand what the ship's personnel, the ones not flying the planes, were doing to make it all happen.

My first stop was the catapult director. I had never met the team in charge of launching me off the ship, and that needed to change. I spent over an hour shadowing the sailors who managed the weight and configuration of every jet, calculating the exact requirements to safely launch each one off the ship.

Once flight ops were fully underway, I introduced myself to the team on the flight deck maneuvering the planes into and out of position—those guys in the opening credits of *Top Gun* moving in slow motion, circling their arms and kicking out their heels. Nothing moves on the flight deck without the direction of taxi directors, or Yellow Shirts as they're called because of their bright yellow vests that highlight their position on the flight deck. They're the magicians who move multimillion-dollar jets around on the scarce real estate, often within inches of each other. My life had been in their hands every time I taxied to the very edge of the carrier, and I hadn't known any of them.

I paid a visit to one of the most miserable, yet vital, operation centers on the entire ship—the arresting gear rooms. There are four on the ship, one for each wire. And they're unbearably hot, loud, and violent. When a jet snags a wire, it reels out the inch-thick braided steel cable with enough tension to bring a speeding jet to a halt without ripping the tailhook off, but without so much slack that it rolls, helplessly, over the edge into the water. Hundreds of times a day, young, enlisted sailors manage and maintain the most important equipment on the ship. It is a dirty and thankless job. I spent as much time with them as I could tolerate, marveling at how they spent an entire six months in the cramped, ear-shattering room. I lasted less than thirty minutes. Those guys are heroes.

And then, the LSOs. Of course, as an LSO, I knew their point of view, and how challenging it could be to wave jets aboard. But the night before was so out of the ordinary that I had to join the senior LSO for that recovery and listen to how he managed to bring us all aboard with nothing but a taxi light and five seconds of observation.

Once night operations started again, I discovered the Carrier Air Traffic Control Center, or CATCC. It was the nerve center for all airborne operations at night and in inclement weather—when pilots need the most help. They coordinated every movement of every plane to and from the ship. It was extraordinary.

I spent an entire day observing, learning, and meeting the people who did all the work to bring the jets aboard. Remarkably, they were thrilled to see me, and in awe of my landing the night before. We bantered some as I tried to downplay what I had done, acknowledging their contribution in our coordinated effort to make it all happen. I came to find that very few pilots had ever visited their workplace, asked them what they did, or thanked them for their crucial assist.

I went to bed that night a different person. Despite being the “face” of Naval Aviation, I realized I was no more important than anyone else on the team. I felt awe-inspired by the sailors I met and, candidly, thankful I didn’t have to endure their hardships.

After that day, I made it a point to get to know them personally, by name, and to thank them repeatedly for bringing me back alive on a regular basis. Every care package filled with candy sent to me on cruise was immediately shared with all of them. I got to know them well, and they me. And they took care of me during the entire deployment.

With a rapid turnaround for our carrier after 9/11, almost everyone from each of those disciplines returned with the ship and sailed on a marathon combat deployment. I had the distinct advantage and pleasure of knowing them all. Jonesy, if you’re reading this, thank you.

Literally nothing happened to my jet on that ship without that entire team. I couldn’t start an engine, taxi one inch of the flight deck, take off, land, or launch a weapon in combat without the support of countless people. And while it was me in my F-18, dropping bombs, who got the recognition in the newspapers and on TV, I was only one cog in a machine of 5,500 men and women doing the miraculous. It was the epitome of a team effort.

LESSON: It’s not about you, it’s about the team

A leader owns the responsibility for everything the team does and fails to do. So, it stands to reason that the leader receives recognition for the team’s performance. But this would be entirely backward.

A good leader subordinates him or herself and gives the team the credit they deserve. If you accept the praise rather than divert it, you are lying to yourself. You are taking credit for work you didn’t do. Because the team members are the ones that make it all happen, not the leader alone.

Without the team, a leader cannot achieve anything. One of the foundational components of *Extreme Ownership*’s first law of Combat Leadership—Cover and Move—is that a team can achieve far more than any individual. Any success is the result of the work done by the team, and therefore they should get the acknowledgment.

COVER AND MOVE

-Teamwork
-Must work together—no silos
-If the team wins, everyone wins
-Relationships are paramount

More often than not, a leader gets placed in a forward-facing role. Jocko Willink is the face of Echelon Front. He is the most prominent figure at the company and often acts as the spokesman for all the work we do. Yet, he goes out of his way to make sure the company’s success is attributed to the team’s hard work. This isn’t a tactic or a maneuver. It’s a genuine recognition of the daily effort put forth by the nearly forty employees who cover everything from booking travel and maintaining HR compliance to doing in-person training with clients and setting up our largest conferences.

Echelon Front’s mission remains to pass on the leadership lessons learned on the battlefield to leaders everywhere, at every level, in every capacity. Jocko could never achieve that on his own to the extent that the

company does. In fact, the opposite is true. Most of Echelon Front's training is conducted by the sixteen other instructors, who travel every day to meet and engage with clients. The team does most of the work.

Jocko's deflection of the credit comes from a genuine understanding that only the team can deliver the success of the mission, no matter who sits in the director's chair.

When I landed on the ship in that snowstorm, I was met with accolades and recognition, which I quickly came to understand were misplaced. I had been just a small part of that mission, and this perspective was reinforced once I saw the extensive effort, often done anonymously, exerted by every member of the aircraft carrier crew. That principle rings true for all teams, whether it's 5,500, 55,000, or just 55 people. Nothing happens without the team. And sometimes the biggest contributors are the least seen or known of the group.

When that's the case, a leader must be proactive in initiating and developing relationships with the rest of the team, especially those doing the tough, mundane, thankless, and often unnoticed work that keeps the machinery running. You should come to understand the roles and responsibilities of each team member. By grasping their daily challenges, you are more likely to empathize when things go wrong and commend them when things go right. I learned this lesson when I met all the ship personnel, but it's just as powerful in our personal lives. When you understand the dedication of your spouse to your family, you become more appreciative and celebratory of their hard work. Just like with your team, you have more gratitude for their contributions and will build stronger relationships.

While Jocko, Leif, and I may get to stand on the stage delivering the lessons that have the potential to change people's lives, countless hours have been logged by others to make that happen. Every single day, our sales team answers phone calls and emails; our program leads speak directly to clients; our legal experts sign contracts; and our support staff book flights, rental cars, and hotel rooms. The amount of work that allows me to successfully train a client is incalculable.

To be a good leader, one must recognize the truth that he or she alone is not responsible for a company's success. It's easy and feels good to accept

the accolades and take the credit. But when you honor the team instead of yourself, you uphold the critical mindsets of leadership. By not accepting or depending on praise, you prevent the dangers of complacency from creeping in. Your humility remains unfazed because you understand that the team accomplishes things that you alone can't. Members across the team have unique skill sets and abilities that you don't possess. The team contributes in valuable ways the leader can't and shouldn't.

When leaders hand over success to the team, it empowers them. Who doesn't like to be told they're directly responsible for record year-over-year growth? No one. Human beings are hardwired to look for validation. An employee who makes personal sacrifices to excel at their job, who misses family events, works overtime, or puts in 110 percent just wants to hear that their efforts are noticed. If leaders set this example, it can create a domino effect, where everyone recognizes the hard work of other colleagues, rather than just their own. When the team is invested and determined to serve one another, a better culture is fostered. Good team members care about what they do, and good leaders know it's in their best interest to acknowledge that effort.

The more people are validated and made to feel like contributors, the more ownership they want to take. It is that feeling of ownership that makes them more likely to create real impact, and the more likely the team is to succeed. Because of their additional effort, not yours. It takes the entire team to win, and everyone plays a vital part.

It's not about you. It's about the team.

Real-World Application

"Last year was the best we've ever had, and I'm facing what feels like a mutiny." The chief people officer was beside herself as she walked me through the recent personnel challenges her company was facing.

Teresa's relatively small pharmaceutical company had impressed their much larger parent firm with their exceptional performance in the highly competitive space in which they worked. It seemed to be a source of pride, but there was nothing but frustration on her face.

The annual conference should have been a day of celebration, but the executives and many of the mid-level managers were focused on pressing issues that threatened to upend the recent successes.

“What’s the biggest issue you’re seeing?” I asked.

“Retention,” she responded without hesitation.

“That’s surprising,” I said. “Seems like this would be a great place to work, given last year’s revenues.”

“I agree, but I’m looking at way more personnel losses than I expected, and from some of our better folks, too.”

“Talk to me about the conference,” I pressed. “Did the retention issue come up?”

“Not formally, no. We tried to keep it positive and to focus on the year-end result,” she explained. “But everyone there knew what’s going on.”

“Who was there?” I asked.

“All twelve sales leads, the four regional managers, and the entire executive team,” Teresa explained.

I gave her a quizzical look that she knew begged for an explanation. They weren’t the biggest company, totaling just under sixty full-time employees; it didn’t make sense that the conference was so small. But for the moment, I moved on.

“Let’s talk about the conference. What was the focus?”

“We went through all the growth numbers, clients, production, revenue, and profit. And it was a bit of a celebration of all those successes,” she explained.

Teresa walked me through the numbers year-over-year and they were impressive, at an all-time high. But in the breakout meeting with the executive team, some troubling information came to light. Many of the junior sales members were actively looking for positions elsewhere, and for the first time in years, support staff were growing frustrated. There were several unfilled jobs, and a number of employees had given notice.

The executives had run through their annual employee engagement survey, a key benchmark used by HR. The survey revealed a big disparity in the feedback, not based on experience but on role.

Managers and above showed great results. Regional managers, sales leads, and the executive team reported high levels of satisfaction and motivation. The layer below, however, was night and day from management. People were not satisfied with what was going on with the company or how they were being treated.

“Do they get paid well?” I asked.

“Yes,” Teresa told me proudly. “Our salaries are on average higher than the rest of the industry because we try and hire the best people.”

“That’s terrific—so what was their main complaint?” I continued.

In the engagement survey, it turned out that recognition, ownership, and contribution scores were low. And it was across the board. From HR to legal, travel, admin, customer service, and even the office manager, no one felt as though they were being properly acknowledged for their hard work. In those departments, the scores were the lowest.

I decided it was time to revisit the off-site.

“Did you get any feedback from these employees about not attending the off-site?” I asked.

The CPO seemed confused about where I was heading, but responded. “It wasn’t practical to bring the entire company. It would shut down operations and cost us way too much,” she explained.

“I get that. A conference is a massive investment, and sometimes it’s not reasonable or logistically possible to make that happen for everyone,” I responded. “So, what did you do instead?”

She gave me the same quizzical look I had given her moments earlier. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“How did you keep the rest of the team aware of everything that happened at the conference? Or let them in on the great results?” I asked.

Her look shifted to concern. “We didn’t really do that. But they’re paid well. And that paycheck is the acknowledgment of those results,” she continued, trying to justify her position.

“Let me ask you this: What message do you think it sends when you bring a few people in supervisory roles to the off-site in Las Vegas and leave the rest at home?” I asked.

She started to talk, then stopped.

“What would have happened if you’d brought everyone? What would the cost offset be?”

It didn’t take her long to come up with the answer.

“Given how hard they work, it would have been worth the cost to make them feel included in the success,” she said, fully understanding the error in leaving the bulk of the team behind. “It will cost me far more to hire and train new people than to have taken everyone to Vegas.

“We need to recognize all of our people,” she concluded.

“I’m glad you see that. But what was the reaction from the rest of the executive team that the entire staff wasn’t present? Did anyone balk at leaving their folks behind?” I wondered aloud.

“I hate to admit this, but not one person who attended the off-site mentioned anything,” she said with an unsteady voice.

“Maybe because they were all in Vegas having a good time, largely on the backs of the people who’d done a lot of the heavy lifting,” I suggested.

She looked crestfallen. Then and there, she decided that moving forward, the annual off-site would be all hands.

A couple of weeks later, I had a follow-up chat with Teresa. She’d already outlined how things would look next year. She chose a venue that was closer to HQ, so it would be an easier trip for most people. She offered options for spouses to join and even to select an elective activity in which to participate. The evening banquet would announce company-wide successes and individual call-outs for every department. And in the meantime, she organized a company happy hour to make up for not having invited the entire team to Vegas.

“I had a lot of people come up to me afterward and thank me. Really, it was me who should be thanking them,” she said. “I still feel awful that I got it wrong this last time, but now I know that nothing happens without every single one of the people we have here. It’s worth anything to acknowledge that.”

It’s not about you. Put the team first if you want to win. You can’t do it without them.

10

PREPARE FOR YOUR DEPARTURE

Niceville, Florida
VMFAT-501 Commander's office
November 26, 2012

"WHEN WILL YOU BE HOME?"

Whitney never called me at work. The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

It was a Monday, often the busiest day of the week for me. I had flown that morning and was scarfing down a late afternoon lunch, already hours behind my day's routine as the CO of the VMFAT-501 Warlords. At that time, we were the first and only operational F-35B squadron in the world. This position was part of that dream scenario which had kept me in the military instead of heading to business school. I led the unit that sat at the epicenter of all of Marine Corps aviation. Under the gaze of the entire Department of Defense, who spent their time contemplating if our brand-new $130 million aircraft was worth the price tag, this was my test to ace.

The Marines had invested fully in the transition to the F-35, but development and initial production of the plane had gone so poorly that it was being seriously considered for termination by the secretary of defense. With the specter of losing our only tactical aviation platform, and with no plan B to speak of, I was given the weighty privilege of leading the squadron through perhaps the most tenuous two years in fighter aviation's recent memory.

It was a daunting task. In 2012, no other lieutenant colonel in the world was responsible for more assets than I was. I personally signed custody

forms for the first fourteen F-35s ever delivered, three of them purchased by the United Kingdom. It tallied nearly $2 billion, an unheard-of amount for a commander in my role. There are no jokes here about writing checks your body can't cash. And no squadron in a generation was more heavily scrutinized than the Warlords. Every single day our operations were assessed and evaluated, with bottom line–conscious detractors looking for any reason to end a program that was just beginning to grow in size, scope, and cost.

In the first weeks of taking command, the commandant of the Marine Corps paid me a personal visit to wish me luck. He wanted to emphasize how important it was to fly our new jets as much as they could tolerate, to prove their capability. He also reminded me how tenuous things were. As if I needed the additional pressure.

"Chip, I know this isn't fair to say, but if you crash a jet, we will lose the F-35 program."

It was an odd set of marching orders from the very top of the chain of command, one of those orders that simultaneously pumped you full of confidence at the trust placed in you and shot your anxiety to Evel-Knievel-jumping-Snake-River levels. The commandant knew I couldn't guarantee we wouldn't lose a jet. Flying them and instructing in them was the primary mission. However, I understood his message and the gravity of the situation. Never in my career had the stakes been so high and the demand so significant. I felt the full weight of my responsibility as CO. It was undeniably a seminal moment for the Corps, and I was at the epicenter of it.

Whitney understood all of this, which made her phone call all the more disturbing.

"What's up?" I replied, trying to act casual.

"I'm worried," she said timidly. I knew exactly what she was talking about.

"Me too." I paused. "I'm coming home."

It was all I could get out. I got in the car and headed home.

One look at my eighteen-month-old daughter's eyes and two minutes of amateur medical research on the computer were enough to prompt us to pile into the car and head back to the base. The drive was a tense twenty

minutes. Whitney and I both instinctively knew there would be no good news once we arrived at the Eglin Air Force Base medical clinic. Isabella's eyes were yellow. Neither WebMD nor common sense offered anything to make us optimistic.

We had played it cool when we politely asked our neighbors to keep an eye on our three-year-old so we could "make a quick trip" to the pediatrician with our little Bella. I was positive we wouldn't be back anytime soon.

Whitney squeezed my hand so tight during the short drive I thought the blood would drain out of it. But our intertwined fingers served as a conduit to share emotions neither of us could tolerate alone, let alone speak.

Bella sat quietly in the back, strapped into her car seat. It was not a good quiet. It was a sickening blend of lethargy and confusion that communicated more than her minuscule vocabulary could. She was barely a year and a half and didn't have the capacity to explain what was wrong. For weeks, Whitney and I had optimistically dismissed her symptoms as "something that would pass."

Bella, having mastered the ability to command attention, was a wild toddler. Totally unlike her older sister, as many younger siblings are, she had been by far the more energetic of the two Berke girls. The big personality belonged to Bella.

The kid had a knack for being demanding and amusing at the same time. Whitney and I would control our laughter when she acted out so as not to encourage her bombastic and melodramatic behavior. She never seemed to rest; almost by design, she had a personality that was the complete opposite of her older sister's. While I frequently lamented her lack of interest in books or TV, which historically had given us some downtime as parents, she was fun to be around and had what seemed to be unlimited energy.

Bella, my girl who could Houdini her way out of her crib, who walked before she crawled, and who didn't need banal language to communicate her strong will, now sat there motionless. This spark plug whom I envisioned becoming an orator, an explorer, a performer, whose life I was

already enjoying watch blossom into an enviable, action-packed adventure, wouldn't lift her head from the car seat.

A little before Thanksgiving of that year, she had steadily and curiously stopped playing or engaging with us. No exact moment comes to mind, but over a period of a few weeks she just started to be slower, fussier, and more interested in being held than active. It was completely out of character for her. Yet I confidently leveraged my parenting experience and chose not to overreact the way Whitney and I had done at every minor deviation from the norm with our first daughter. Long gone were the days of panicking over every scratch and whimper. We were veteran parents who'd learned from the gamut of rookie mistakes we'd made on the firstborn. So, as Bella's temperament ebbed and flowed, I knew it was just a phase that would pass.

When I saw the yellowing, which looked like a stain on the whites of her eyes, I was stricken with guilt. How long must she have felt ill and been unable to explain it to parents who essentially ignored the now painfully obvious change in her behavior? I still get queasy recalling how many symptoms were evident and how long we avoided acknowledging them. In hindsight, it was so clear, and, as we drove, I imagined what her doctor would say once we arrived. Mortified at my dereliction of parental duty, I dreaded the questions the doctor was about to ask, which would reveal not only the full extent of my baby girl's symptoms, but also the abject ineptitude of her father.

Whitney handed our unhappy Bella over to the doctor. Inside a minute, he understood the gravity of the situation.

"I'm going to do some blood work to see what we can see."

The doctor was wonderful and, mercifully, wasted no time with passing judgment on us. He focused solely on Bella.

A career Air Force officer turned civilian provider at the Eglin Air Force Base medical clinic, he was the doctor parents dream of when their newborn gets assigned a primary care physician. Bella had been only weeks old when we first arrived at Eglin and knew no one else in her medical life other than him. To this day, he is revered in our household for how he cared for Bella before, during, and after her illness.

Whitney and I took turns holding our daughter. Her jaundiced eyes staring back at me, silently pleading for help, eviscerated my entire being. I'm not the sort of man who does "helpless" well, and sitting in the waiting room doing nothing would be the beginning of what felt like an eternity of helplessness. My mind raced, entertaining every possible dire scenario—yes, even the one where my daughter didn't survive. Being inside my head was torture. But I knew it was worse for my wife, so I kept my darkest thoughts to myself. They were unbearable.

The doctor rushed the labs and returned with the news. Bella's bilirubin level, a measure of liver toxicity, was 14.6, more than forty times above normal. That's when I understood that the discoloration of her skin was now obviously not the simplistic "olive from the Florida sun" explanation I'd concocted in my head. Liver enzymes that normally report between 10 and 50 were well into the thousands—staggeringly high numbers which had slowly built up over time and indicated that her suffering had started much earlier than the last few days when we finally started to pay more attention to her unusual behavior. More obscure tests like GGT, Pro-time, INR, and a series of other measurements I now know better than any parent should ever have to all pointed to a severe liver problem—so severe, in fact, that the little clinic which sat inside a makeshift trailer on the edge of the Eglin fighter jet base had nowhere near enough resources to help.

"She needs to get to a real hospital, immediately," our doctor said. There wasn't time to lose.

Whitney and I drove ninety minutes west to Naval Air Station Pensacola. It was a place I had known well at the start of my career. My memories of Pensacola were punctuated by fun. There, I learned to fly. When I wasn't doing that, you could find me on a beach with a cold one. I don't remember there even being a hospital. In an instant, it became a bastion of hope to help my child and restore some comfort to my anguishing wife.

We found ourselves in the pediatric gastroenterology clinic with the on-call attending physician already en route from his house. It was late, well after normal hours. Our Eglin doctor had called ahead and shared the full lab results with the Pensacola team, who had triggered the recall of

everyone needed to figure out next steps for my vulnerable baby girl, who now clung to her mom with what little energy she had left in her little body.

The next several hours were a blur. I don't remember anything other than watching Bella get poked with needles over and over as more blood was drawn for the myriad tests being run to assess what was wrong. Bella's liver numbers were dangerously high, and the concern on the hospital team's faces pushed Whitney and me over an edge we had been teetering on for hours. There were discussions about transplants and liver specialists. My head spun with the onslaught of information. I vaguely recall pieces of those conversations, but the tears streaming uncontrollably down my wife's face as she stoically tried to focus on every word—those will haunt me forever.

"She's going to be here for a while. I don't know what's wrong, but she's not good. Did you bring any personal items?" the intern asked, as if she already knew the answer.

I hadn't brought anything. Not for me, Whitney, or Bella. Chalk up another one for Dad.

The doctor pulled me aside and suggested I go home and pack some things for an extended stay. What did that mean exactly? Days? Weeks? "I don't know" was all he gave me.

He explained that he was torn about whether she had a viral or an autoimmune issue and needed some time to see what might happen with a few different drug options. But based on how Bella responded, or didn't, it was possible she was going to need even more specialized care than Pensacola could provide.

Another wave of helplessness choked me, doing its best to derail me. I needed a mission, to feel as though I was doing something, anything, to help. Going to get what Whitney, Bella, and I needed, for however long we'd be here, was just such a mission. I drove home to pack a few bags, sort out childcare for my elder daughter, and return the next morning. By the time I saw Pensacola again, after a sleepless night, it was already forever changed for me. Where once it was a place of carefree happiness, now it was where my world could be utterly destroyed.

“We can’t really help her here,” the doctor said when I returned. “The closest hospital that can is Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta. They have an incredible team. I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but it’s world-class, and we are lucky they’re so close. We need to get her up there now.”

In another blur, Whitney and I stood on the tarmac of the Pensacola Regional Airport as our tiny daughter, strapped to an oversized yellow gurney, was loaded onto a Life Flight aircraft to take her to Atlanta. Whitney tucked in beside Bella, and together they made the short flight north to a more capable facility that I prayed held some answers. I’d stood on the flight line countless times, forgetting the details of most. But that day, watching the plane taxi away, launch into the bright, blue sky, and disappear out of sight with that precious cargo, I will never forget.

I have no memories of leaving the airport or going home and packing. I’m not sure how I coordinated long-term care for my other daughter as I prepared to leave her behind. I certainly don’t recall any phone calls to my second in command at VMFAT-501 alerting him of my departure, which I can only assume I made. There is nothing in my consciousness about the time between leaving Pensacola and arriving in Atlanta. Not a single thing. All I recall is getting to the hospital in Atlanta, walking into the room to see my daughter, and seeing my wife looking up at me, so much emotion etched on her face. At that point, the joy of a much-anticipated reunion mixed incongruently with the paralyzing fear of having a sick child and the painful realization that this cold, cramped hospital room was home for the foreseeable future.

Bella received care instantly. By the time Whitney and Bella had arrived, my baby’s liver enzymes had peaked to over 3,000. Without context that number is meaningless but, suffice to say, it mandated immediate and aggressive action if the doctors were going to heal my daughter.

They did just that.

While of course it wasn’t the case, we felt as if the entire hospital staff were fully devoted to my girl’s care. One trip around the ward revealed dozens of other children dealing with their own trauma, but the world-class

patient care in the Egleston wing at Children's Atlanta made us all feel like we were the center of the universe.

All Whitney and I could do was be there. In terms of practical contribution, we were borderline useless. But the need for us to be present, not just for Bella but for each other, was total and undeniable. The emotional burden of the situation was too heavy for one person to bear, so we leaned on each other. Of the three of us, Bella acclimated first and seemed to handle the turmoil the best.

Credit goes to my daughter, whose spirit, while temporarily dampened by her situation, was a fighter to her core. But I also attribute her easy adjustment to the caring staff and to the fact that both of her parents were with her constantly. It was where we needed to be.

It upset me that many other kids were alone in their rooms or that their parents only came at visiting hours in the evenings. Then it dawned on me: I was the lucky one. Nearly all of the other parents in the pediatric clinic time-shared with their spouse, if they had one. They had to carve out limited time to be with their kids because they were needed at work, had to maintain a household with other children, or were simply managing life as best they could. Whitney and I were there 24/7, without distraction. And despite the fact that I literally slept on a hospital floor for weeks, I was able to focus all my attention on Bella and Whitney, which was exactly where it needed to be for Bella to maximize her chances of recovery.

Of course, the timing of it all could not have been worse when it came to that $2 billion project I was supposed to be managing. Pilots needed to be trained. New best practices needed to be put into place. An entire new F-35 protocol needed to be developed and learned, all while the dogs barked at the gate. And now I was gone.

Unlike any other time in my career, there was no preparing for my absence. I just disappeared. In a heartbeat, I was more than three hundred miles away. There was no final meeting with my staff to assign roles and responsibilities. I didn't close out any critical tasks. No emptying the inbox and setting up the email out-of-office reply. There was nothing in the way of preparation. As I said, I don't even remember whether I called anyone or what I might have told them. I simply left.

Once I had settled into the hospital routine, I obviously thought and worried about the squadron from time to time. I would sneak out for a quick call as needed. But by and large, they were on their own. And none of the squadron's sense of responsibility waned in my absence. Scrutiny of the program didn't subside because I was out-of-pocket, either. There was no respite for the Warlords. Microscopic attention was still focused on my team, and no expectations were relaxed by anyone at the DoD for extenuating circumstances.

In retrospect, if I did anything right as a CO, it wasn't teaching my pilots how to fly fifth-generation fighters or explaining the nuance of stealth. It wasn't nailing newspaper or TV interviews, or any public relations appearances. It certainly wasn't the hours I logged in the jet, or the countless emails and operational summaries I sent up the chain of command.

It was making sure everyone understood what we were trying to achieve as a squadron. It was creating buy-in at every level of the organization so that everyone's decisions were guided by the belief in the singular vision and the values I instilled in the unit. Ironically, the most important contribution I made to the squadron had very little to do with the infamous F-35 or the directive I was given by the highest-ranking officer in the Marine Corps. My most valuable contribution was allowing every member of the team to grow and develop to their maximum capability.

But I always assumed their growth would help the Corps sometime down the road as their careers naturally progressed. When I'd first gotten to the squadron, I certainly wasn't thinking about an unscheduled departure that came less than a year into my tour as CO. And while I felt the obligation to train and mentor many of the officers who would one day go on to command their own squadrons, I wasn't doing it in preparation for my absence. At its core, 501 was a training squadron. My expectation when taking over command was that I'd be there to train them the entire time. I was wrong.

Never once did I consider how prepared they were to lead without me. Though, my being their commander, that should have been my main focus from day one. I viewed their development as a long-term process. I saw

even my most senior officers as years away from being ready for command and assumed there was plenty of time to ready them for their own tours as squadron commanders. Bella threw that timeline out the window.

Yet, the application of decentralized command across 501 paid off, thankfully. My team thought independently. They focused on the mission. Most important, they made decisions that were in the best interest of the squadron and prioritized the team's success. In short, they led. Despite all my experience as a fifth-generation fighter pilot and instructor, the ultimate measure of my performance now would be how well the squadron performed in my absence.

And while sad and unfortunate for me, my absence wasn't that disruptive for the team. By the time I returned a month later, there were no metrics suffering. Nothing was left undone. Aside from dust on my desk and a slightly bruised ego at the realization I wasn't nearly as important as I would have liked to think, everyone was fine. And so was the program. In fact, it was as healthy as, if not healthier than, the day I disappeared.

My absence reminded me of the power of leadership and highlighted my obligation to develop my teammates' ability to lead on their own, at any time. It is an obligation all leaders have.

I've had the thought countless times that what happened wasn't fair, not to Bella and not to us, as parents. I have fallen victim to self-pity more times than I would like to admit. But those emotion-laced bouts never helped, and they never will. Self-pity doesn't solve problems. It is corrosive. It leads to a breakdown of mental capacity, overshadows clarity, and is a self-fulfilling prophecy that leads quickly to failure, especially for a team that is reliant on a leader who can't deliver because of an unexpected situation.

When we left the hospital the following month, Bella, while greatly improved, came home with an ongoing and likely never-ending medical circumstance which will define and shape her and our lives. But mostly she's a normal kid with an abundance of energy and a will to match. Over the last decade, she has had relapses of varying degrees, all recognizable and manageable. And while there is always a certain level of residual fear

knowing her condition may never go away, one thing I don’t worry about is any negative impact on work when my focus fittingly shifts to her.

Leadership will endure in my absence.

LESSON: Good leadership outlasts the leader

One day, you will not be around. It could be a heartbreaking emergency, like I faced with Bella. Or you could get an external offer, and you may be leaving your team mid-project in pursuit of new opportunity. Your team must be able to not only survive without your presence, but thrive. You are not singularly important to the success of your team—but your leadership is.

If your position confers you authority over the team, you may think that you are the only one truly capable of doing your job. But this assumption is misguided by our ego, as most things are. Our ego wants to believe that we are irreplaceable. As I was commanding VMFAT-501, I had moments where I was blinded by my ego and thought that my team couldn’t fully succeed without me. After all, on paper I was the most qualified fifth-generation pilot in the world. But I couldn’t have been happier to be proved wrong and to discover one of the most significant duties of a leader—to create more leaders. The ultimate measure of success is the number of leaders we create, not how many followers we have.

No matter your rank or title, everyone needs to lead. It is incumbent on all leaders to develop subordinates and teammates alike. When we do so, we help them mature, grow in capability, and elevate over time inside an organization. Decentralized Command is the fourth Law of Combat outlined in the book *Extreme Ownership* and relies on this approach to development. When everyone on the team understands why they do what they do, they can act in the best interest of the entire team. Decision-making can then be pushed to the lowest possible level. Decentralized Command is what allows all team members to contribute to and support the mission to their fullest potential, no matter where they sit in the org chart.

Decentralization is built upon training, trust, and an understanding of the objective the team is trying to achieve, what we call the "why." Subordinates who understand *why* they are doing what they do are far more able to solve problems than those who are merely told what to do and how to do it. Understanding the *why* lets people make decisions on their own, without relying on their commanders or bosses to tell them what to do.

At Echelon Front, we say, "If you want to be in charge of everything, you need to be in charge of nothing." Leaders should constantly look for ways to transfer their earned power and knowledge to less experienced teammates. Eventually, these leaders who train and empower their people to understand and execute all responsibilities will eventually have nothing left to do. Although it might feel burdensome to pass along duties, you open yourself to new opportunities. You obtain the capacity to take on more strategic positions, so this type of leadership usually results in promotion to a bigger set of obligations and growth inside the company. So, when we teach the concept of Decentralized Command, we say that a good leader works himself or herself out of a job—and into a better one.

But more important, *giving away power*—specifically the power to lead and make decisions—is at the root of empowerment. When leaders relinquish and transfer their duties correctly, the added responsibility will strengthen the recipients. Eventually the team is able to do everything on their own, without relying on the person in charge for anything. New leaders will move up, and they will train their own to follow suit, creating a continuous cycle of leadership. Decentralized Command is ideal for the team and for all its members.

But leaders are ultimately responsible for anticipating, preparing for, and setting up the team for their departure, planned or not. It does not happen on its own, and it doesn't happen to leaders who maintain their grip on power. Developing subordinates and creating a decentralized culture isn't only about increasing responsibility for more junior employees. It is about preparing them for the challenges we don't see coming. Bad things happen. The unexpected occurs. Things beyond our control impact our lives. That's when leadership is most important. The team's ability to lead in your absence is the ultimate reflection of how well you have led.

When I took command of VMFAT-501, I knew it was a twenty-four-month tour of duty. When I arrived in Ramadi, I marked my calendar knowing I would return home in seven months. There were time constraints on my leadership, so I acted accordingly. On the opposite end of the spectrum, private-sector CEOs can sit in their chairs for decades. Company founders and entrepreneurs often spend their entire careers in the same role. It's easy to acclimate to the length of time we expect to lead an organization.

But we never know what will come our way that might take us out of our role, temporarily, indefinitely, or permanently. So, a leader must anticipate that impact, then embrace and plan for it. No one is immune from the unexpected curveballs life routinely throws at us. But a sign of a good leader is how resiliently their team responds to these unforeseen obstacles.

When only one person can execute a task, they become a single point of failure. If a leader retains control over certain aspects of the team's responsibilities, their ego has pigeonholed them into a risky position. Since they cannot leave their current role and advance, their desire to be the only one capable of doing a job hinders their growth as leaders. More important, it can undermine the whole operation and team. A leader becomes a single point of failure when they preserve all the power the entire team needs to execute effectively. So, if that leader is unexpectedly unable to perform their function, everyone else suffers.

If you haven't put your team in a position to be successful, you are setting them up to fail. You should not allow anyone to be reliant on you; otherwise, they will struggle the minute that you're gone. The more a team can deliver without you, the better its performance in the long run. The team is better positioned to succeed, no matter when you are there and why you are not.

Don't lament or dwell on the inevitability of problems. Instead, expect and prepare for the unexpected. Not just for yourself, but for your team. One day you won't be there, for reasons big or small, and you need them to be able to win without you. The hallmark of success is the team's ability to be just as effective when the leader is there as when they are not.

Real-World Application

The caller ID disturbed me immediately. I knew the phone number well and always enjoyed talking to its owner. She was a client I had come to love working with as much as any at Echelon Front. Normally, her calls and texts were welcome and appreciated but it was Sunday afternoon, and we had no events scheduled on the calendar with her or her teams for more than a month.

I was sitting in a lounge chair in my backyard as Whitney and I enjoyed a lazy day at the pool watching our kids and a few of their friends enjoy the Southern California weather we had come to love. Already anticipating something bad, I got up and walked around the corner to take the call.

“Hey, Janet!” I said, feigning excitement. Janet was the CAO (chief administrative officer) and had worked directly for Jack for more than a decade.

The quiet on the other end confirmed what I already suspected. The voice on the line feebly said hello, then delivered news that was even worse than I expected.

“Jack passed away yesterday.”

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry … I, I don’t know what to say,” I stammered. “What happened?”

“He was at dinner with his family…” Janet couldn’t get through the story and stopped mid-sentence.

We shared a long, painful silence. I knew to wait however long Janet needed to regain her composure. It felt like forever.

“He said he had a bad headache and asked to leave early. He collapsed by the entrance and died in the restaurant,” she said. It was the worst of situations. Restaurant workers had called 911 but it was too late. He had a massive aneurysm and there was nothing anyone could do.

As I tried not to visualize what must have been a horrifying scenario, I attempted to keep my composure with Janet, who was barely getting through the conversation. Whitney’s concern got the best of her, and she peeked around the corner to see what was going on. She knew without my needing to tell her that something was terribly wrong.

“Janet, I’m heartbroken for everyone. I can’t imagine what Melanie and the kids are going through right now. What do you need? I’m here for anything,” I said.

Janet continued, “Jack loved you so much. Your team has made such an impact on all of us. His entire life has changed for the better in the last few years since reading the book and connecting with you all. But we don’t know what to do right now. I don’t know what to do. You’re the first person I called after meeting with the executive team this morning. Most of the firm doesn’t even know. Everyone that does is in shock.”

Jack was the CEO, and a man rightfully placed on a pedestal inside a medium-sized engineering firm that designed precision measuring equipment with a shockingly broad range of uses. Having been there for well over a decade, he was revered. His reputation as an engineer was unequaled, and he served as a mentor to everyone under his watch. He had taken over when the firm was small and developed it into one of the premier engineering and design firms in the country. He spearheaded technological development unmatched by the firm’s competitors. His company and its reputation were second to none.

More remarkable, he was a beloved boss. Having embraced the principles of *Extreme Ownership* in every aspect of his life, he had reinvented himself over the previous few years. He was active, fit, and engaged, and had helped his entire company become invested in the same way he was. I truly considered him a friend, and his company was the model for how to reach full potential through leadership. Jack was as good a man as I have ever known, with a company and a family that were equally wonderful.

Now he was gone.

I could sense how lost Janet felt. I didn’t know what she might need, so I offered to fly up and help at the office while Jack’s closest friends from the senior leadership team turned their focus to his wife Melanie, their kids, and all the immediate needs of the situation.

Janet thanked me and graciously accepted the offer. A few days later, I landed in Seattle and made my way to their office, anticipating chaos. What I witnessed completely amazed me.

I saw a group of people doing exactly what they needed to be doing.

Despite how raw the emotions were, the team had rallied around each other, detaching from those emotions as best they could, to keep things working. An interim CEO had been put in place to handle day-to-day responsibilities. A task tracker was put up on a whiteboard in the lunchroom for everyone to see and add to. All major clients had been called. The downstream teams had been informed of what happened and priorities were defined for them. Anything critical to the firm's long-term stability was assigned an owner, while less important tasks were identified and put on hold.

I witnessed decentralized command in action, and everywhere I looked I saw the right people doing the right things and making decisions that helped the team. They created space for people who needed a break, and trust me, there was no shortage of completely appropriate emotional reactions over the death of such a well-loved man and leader. People were sad, there were tears, yet there was no judgment placed on anyone who was struggling with the shock. The team was taking care of each other, and at the same time, taking care of business, exactly as they needed to be. Exactly, they all knew, as Jack would have wanted.

All the while, the family was getting a hundred percent of what they needed. Full attention was focused on them as they tried to make sense of an absolute worst-case scenario. Everything, from funeral arrangements to meal scheduling, was fully coordinated for Melanie and the kids.

Jack's impact, and the culture he created, had permeated the entire team of well over two hundred employees. Despite their shock and grief over what had happened less than a week before, and despite how raw the emotions still were, I found myself with almost nothing to do.

Serving as a sounding board and outside observer who validated that virtually everything they were doing was exactly what needed to be done was all they required of me. I was in awe. It put the power of leadership on full display. It was the worst possible situation, requiring the best possible leadership, and it was being handled marvelously.

The heartache of Jack's death endures. The tragedy will leave an indelible mark on his family and his company. He will never be replaced

and the void he left cannot be filled.

At the same time, how his team responded in the worst of circumstances remains the most inspiring and remarkable experience I have witnessed in my time as a leadership instructor at Echelon Front.

Jack, even in death, represents the type of leader we all should strive to be. He practiced the skill of leadership every day. And it was remarkable how committed he was to instilling the same mindset and behavior in his team. It was his commitment to good leadership that made it possible for them not just to endure the pain of his unexpected loss, but to persevere and even thrive after his passing.

While we all wish he was still with us, he provided a gift to those around him no one expected: He prepared them to succeed without him. And while all of us, especially those of us at the very top of an organization, would like to think of ourselves as indispensable, being so doesn't help the team. The more we are responsible for, the more important it is to build a culture where the team can carry on without us. If they are reliant on our leadership and skills, they will fail in our absence, especially if it is permanent.

I saw this from the best leaders in combat. I see this in the best leaders everywhere. When we teach stories of impact at Echelon Front, Jack's sits alone at the top, not because of how tragic his death was but because of how remarkably well his team responded to the crisis.

There is nothing more important than the skill of leadership. It is what allows people to thrive in a world filled with chaos and trauma we can't always anticipate. The best leadership outlasts the leader. Prepare your team to outlast you. Give them authority to perform their tasks, make decisions, and stand on their own when the occasion calls for it. It's the only way you can ensure they'll win, no matter what happens.

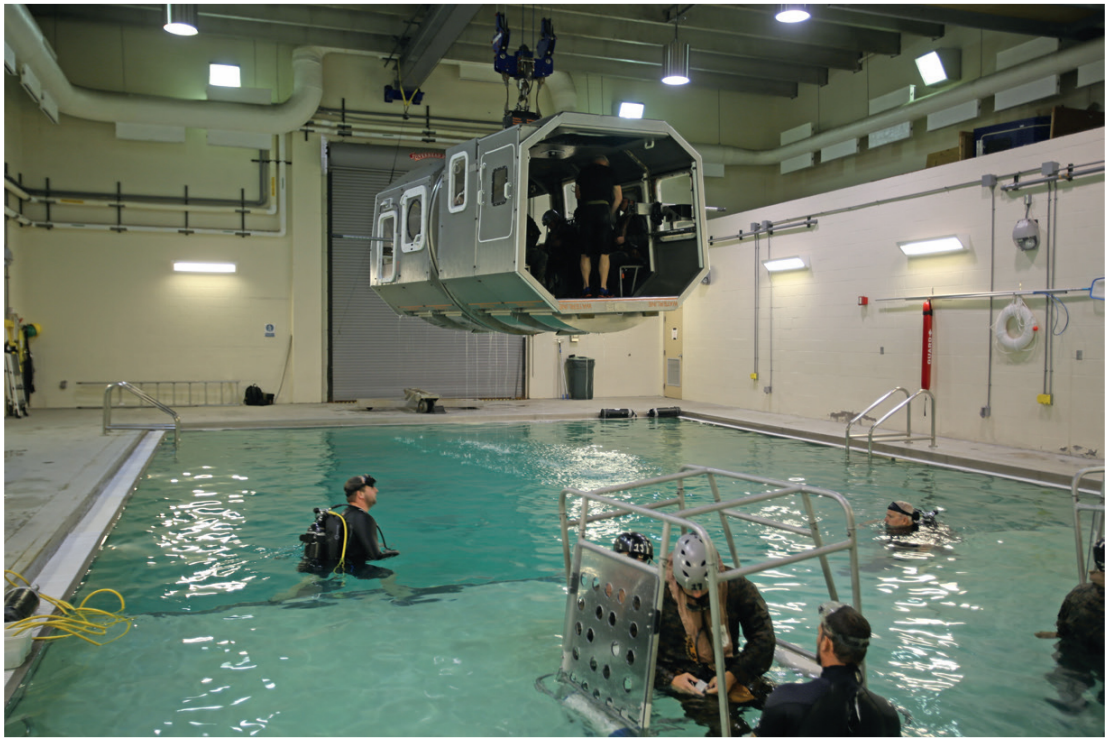
Be humble and forget about perfection. Don't get complacent or be afraid to change. Listen to the team and put them ahead of yourself. Empower your team and yourself to lead through the worst-case scenarios by taking preemptive ownership. Every problem is a leadership problem—from TOPGUN to war and from business to life. The solution is in your own hands. To find it, you need to lead.

Me and the corpsman, affectionately known as Doc (right), who saved my life on numerous occasions. He directed me toward this ditch where I barely escaped an enemy ambush. Returning to the same location brought a wry smile, recalling how close I was to dying. (*Courtesy of the author*)

The F/A-18C Hornet was my first love and brought me my first taste of combat. This is over the skies of Afghanistan. As the squadron's most recent TOPGUN graduate, I led many missions to support ground operations from 2001–2002. (*Courtesy of the author*)

The Basic School was the first stop for me, and all Marine officers. It taught me many lessons in humility and delivered a lifelong friendship with Cordell Bennigson (right). My confidence went overboard and turned to arrogance as I progressed through the training, and he helped me reign in my ego. (*Courtesy of the author*)

TOPGUN instructors routinely fly camouflage-painted fighters to simulate enemy aircraft. I flew Aircraft 44 and many just like it throughout my three years on the staff. This is the same jet I flew when Tom Downing, Commander of TOPGUN, reminded me that complacency is a killer. (*Courtesy of the author*)



The Helicopter Underwater Egress Trainer. Or simply, the helo dunker. While you're strapped in and blindfolded, it sends you for a ride, simulating a helicopter crash at sea. Occupants are overcome with fear and panic as they scramble to escape the chaos. This was my first taste of the superpower known as detachment. Controlling emotions is critical to making effective decisions. (*Courtesy of Department of Defense/DVIDs*)

Landing aboard an aircraft carrier requires precision, as the margin for error is not only small, but can also be catastrophic when exceeded. This day's clear sky made for one of the easier landings of my career when returning home from a mission over Afghanistan in 2002. (*Courtesy of the author*)

Corporal Chris Leon was the best of us. Only twenty years old, he was as tough as they come—smart, daring, selfless. He gave his life to save a teammate on June 20, 2006. My son, Matthew Leon Berke, bears his name and carries his legacy. Semper Fidelis, Marine. (*Courtesy of the author*)

Whitney is the prettiest girl I ever knew and my favorite person. This is the day I left for Iraq in early 2006. Knowing the danger that was facing me, having only been married for nine months, she whispered to me “Don’t be brave.” Which was her way of telling me to come home. I did come home, and brought back many challenges, which we worked through together. I learned how to listen from her. (*Courtesy of the author*)

The F-22 Raptor is the most powerful fighter jet in the world. I was lucky to become the first and only Marine pilot ever to fly it. It exceeded every expectation I had, and I relished seeing my name painted on tail 128. But the transition to the cockpit of a fifth-generation fighter was not easy for me. It taught me how to overcome our natural resistance to change. (*Photograph by Ted Carlson/Fotodynamics.com*)

The environment on an aircraft carrier is dynamic, chaotic, and potentially deadly. The amount of work it takes to launch and recover jets is Herculean and often goes unnoticed. The cockpit feels like the center of the world, but without the work of the entire team, I wouldn't go anywhere. Always put the team first. (*Courtesy of the author*)

One of the toughest days in my parenting life was realizing my sweet little eighteen-month-old girl was sick. I was in complete denial at first, but it served a valuable lesson in leadership and life. None of us knows what the future holds, so we better prepare ourselves and our team for anything. (*Courtesy of the author*)

Echelon Front's mission is to pass on the leadership lessons learned on the battlefield to help everyone develop the skills necessary to take care of their people, lead themselves, and lead their teams to victory. The MUSTER leadership conference has trained well over ten thousand leaders on the foundational principles of Extreme Ownership. (*Courtesy of Echelon Front*)

I have been lucky to be with Jocko, Leif, and Echelon Front from nearly the beginning. It's been an honor to serve as the chief development officer and to help contribute to the growth of what was once a four-person team into what is now the world's premier leadership consultancy. (*Courtesy of Echelon Front*)

One of my favorite pictures from my ground deployment to Iraq. Someone caught Jocko (right) and me sleeping on a rooftop after roughly forty-eight straight hours of operations pushing our teams into the heart of enemy territory in the city of Ramadi. If you're wondering why two Navy SEALs asked a Marine pilot to join Echelon Front after we left the military, it was because of the bond we forged in that brutal fight in the summer of 2006. (*Courtesy of Echelon Front*)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my wife: I always thank you first, and I always will. Nothing happens without you. To Jocko and Leif: Without your support, this book would have never been written. To Mike: Your mastery of the English language made this book so much better. To Lyn: You are brilliant at turning ideas into words. And to Becca, Bella, and Matt: You teach me something about leadership every day. I love you.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Courtesy of the Author

Dave Berke is a retired US Marine Corps officer, fighter pilot, and ground combat leader. A seasoned F/A-18 Hornet pilot, Dave was deployed twice aboard aircraft carriers in support of combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. He became an instructor pilot at TOPGUN, where he qualified in the F-16 Fighting Falcon and served as the training officer, the senior instructor at TOPGUN. He went on to serve as a Forward Air Controller, became the only Marine ever to fly the F-22 Raptor, and commanded the world's first F-35B squadron. Since transitioning from the military, Dave has continued to apply his leadership expertise as the chief development officer at Echelon Front, where he advises, instructs, and speaks on leadership and personal growth. You can sign up for email updates here.

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BALANCE ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Assess yourself as a leader in your implementation of the 4 Laws of Combat. The goal is to recognize where you are out of balance. Be honest and identify areas for growth and improvement.

Cover and Move

Teamwork, rather than the individual, is paramount. Breaking down silos to promote mutually supportive efforts to achieve overall mission accomplishment and success for the organization.

	Too little		Balanced		Too much
1	Doesn't fully understand the mission of other teams	Partially understands the mission of other teams	Completely understands all aspects and missions of other teams and peer leaders	Understands other teams' missions better than your own	Understands everyone else's mission significantly better than your own
2	Provides support to other teams when directed to	Responds to requests for support from other teams	Provides proactive, timely, and effective support to other teams whenever needed	Provides support that occasionally interferes with other teams' efficiency	Provides unsolicited support that can interfere with other teams' efficiency
3	Does little to develop relationships with other team leaders	Develops relationships with some but not all other leaders and teams	Goes the extra mile to establish and maintain good relationships	Sometimes "puts off" other leaders with uncollaborative behavior	Steps on toes of other leaders, and doesn't form effective relationships

			with other team leaders to ensure mission success		
4	Concerned about own team's mission and prioritizes it above overall mission success	Feels own team's mission is more important than other teams	Perfectly balances support of other teams with achievement of own team's mission	Support of other teams sometimes impacts own team's ability to execute	Spends so much time focused on other teams, own team is ineffective in executing mission

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